

Year one

Vernon and Petunia were obviously quite successful at suppressing Harry's magic, but what if they had been even more so?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard."

To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled. "Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"

Harry looked into the fire and thought hard.

"Er, no, actually," he answered.

"What? Never got angry and turned somebody's hair blue, or was running scared and ended up on top of a roof or somethin'?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope, never."

"Tricky customer, eh?" mumbled Ollivander absently. "Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere -- I wonder, now - - yes, why not -- unusual combination -- holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Harry took the wand. None of the others reacted any different to a normal stick, and he was once again starting to believe this was all some elaborate prank. Any moment, he expected a television camera-bearing host to jump out at him laughing.

This one felt slightly warm in his fingers as he raised it above his head, and then brought it swishing down through the dusty air. A single, dull spark fell limply from the end, disappearing even before it reached the floor.

Hagrid whooped and clapped, but Mr. Ollivander looked almost worried, "Well, well, well... how curious... how very curious... "

Harry didn't ask what was curious; he was too busy staring in amazement at the spot where the magical spark emerged.

"Potter, Harry!"

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little hissing fires all over the hall. "Potter, did she say?"

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he was looking at the black inside of the hat.

He waited.

"Hmm," said a small voice faintly, as if it was very far away. Harry strained to hear what it was saying, but only caught a few words here and there. "Difficult. Very difficult. --- courage, ---- bad mind ----, my goodness, --- prove yourself, ----- where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and shouted the thought, "Not Slytherin, not Slytherin."

"--- Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "----- Slytherin will help you," Harry started to panic. "--- better be --"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

With confused thoughts filling his head, Harry quickly took the hat from his head and got off the stool.

"Mr Potter. I can't help notice you seem to be very taken with your lessons. Are you particularly interested in the night sky?"

Harry reluctantly glanced up from his telescope to address the Astronomy Professor.

"Yes Ma'am," he answered distractedly. "I never got to see the stars, or to stay up late. I was always locked away before the sun went down."

Not waiting for the professor to reply before returning to his eyepiece, he never saw the look of shock his unthinking words provoked. It took the woman a few seconds to compose herself enough to continue in a normal voice.

“Yes, well, your class work is exemplary. I do hope you can keep it up.”

“Don’t worry Professor,” he answered, not taking his eye away from a distant constellation. “I enjoy this too much to not put the effort in.”

Somehow, the Professor knew he was telling the absolute truth.

“Oi, Potter. You want to play a game of snap?”

“Shush,” said Harry, leaning forward to try to catch the quiet words of the ghostly history professor. As if barely seeing the man wasn’t difficult enough, his classmates appeared not to care how much noise they made instead of concentrating on the lecture. Only Hermione Granger was even trying to pay attention, and Ron Weasley was openly snoring on his desk. “I’m trying to listen!”

“Come on. It’s dead boring. How can you stand it?”

Harry sighed in exasperation. Luckily he had already read about this particular battle before, and so wasn’t missing that much, but if he didn’t nip this in the bud now, it might continue and end up making him miss something.

“Look,” he said rather loudly, unfortunately attracting the attention of several other students. “Where I grew up, I was never allowed to hear any stories about goblins, or witches, or anything that Muggles might consider ‘unnatural’. You might find all of this boring because you grew up with it all around you, but I’ve never even read a fantasy story about magical battles, let alone one that actually happened. It’s great.”

“But, it’s so boring! Binns just drones on and on.”

Harry shook his head in exasperation. Sometimes he wondered if the Ravenclaws were right and Gryffindors had no imagination. "Don't just listen, try to see. Imagine you are standing on the walls of the castle, and the massive Goblin horde is pouring down the valley towards you, screaming, and yelling for your blood. Think about seeing huge fireballs tearing through their ranks, gouging lines and leaving charred bodies behind, but they keep on coming until they reach the walls and start climbing up. Pretend it's a Muggle movie, if you've ever seen one of those. It's awesome."

"Is that how you do it?" asked Hermione. "Is that how you remember the names and places and sequences? You think of it as if it is a movie in a cinema?"

"Yeah, well sort of. I never actually ever got to see a movie at the cinema, but I did watch a bit of telly at Mrs Figg's every now and then, so I sort of know what they are. When I was locked in my, er, room, I'd get bored quite a bit. I used to make up my own shows, in my head. This is just like that, only much better because I have somebody else supplying the storyline and I just have to fill in the details, instead of having to come up with the whole plot from scratch."

"That's a great idea," agreed Hermione.

Several of the Muggle-born children nodded and started actually paying attention to the ghost at the front of the class. Harry was already deeply back in his imagined world, watching history unfold before him.

"Wow, Harry. Where did you learn to handle a trowel so well?" asked Neville Longbottom after seeing Harry deftly re-pot a particularly stubborn burning sunflower.

"I used to do a bit of gardening for my Aunty and Uncle," answered Harry as he cleaned off his workbench. "Although she didn't have any flowers that tried to focus the sun's rays onto you in order to eat your rotting corpse, most of this is just the same. Dragon dung, cow manure, it's all the same sh-"

“Harry!” interrupted Hermione.

Harry smiled and reached for his next plant. On the other side of the greenhouse, he noticed several students having a ridiculous amount of trouble with the simplest tasks.

“They grew up in rich pure-blood houses,” explained Neville after seeing Harry’s confused look. “Never had to get their hands dirty before. That’s why they have so much trouble now.”

“What about you, Neville? You’re a pureblood, aren’t you?” asked Hermione.

Neville laughed. “Yeah, but my old Gran made sure I did my share of the house work, don’t worry about that. She let me do some gardening every week because I couldn’t really break anything, and I really like it. I reckon you must be a bit of a natural though, Harry. You look like you have been doing that your whole life.”

Harry grunted non-committedly and moved the finished pot over next to his others, all the time wondering if he could sneak some of the more deadly plants in amongst Petunia’s roses as a nasty shock for her.

Even Potions wasn’t that bad.

Snape’s lambasting and rude comments were barely a slightly annoying mumble to a boy who had been derided for virtually every minute of his life that he could remember.

Following complex cooking instructions gave Harry extraordinary skills, compared to even the most talented of his classmates, but no matter how perfectly he sliced the ingredients, or how spot-on his timing, his potions barely ever worked, much to Snape and the Slytherin’s joy.

Despite this, Harry’s skill made him popular with his Gryffindor classmates, who always wanted to team with him to take advantage of his advanced preparation skills.

Teaming him up with Neville, at Professor Snape's, insistence made both of their work improve dramatically. Harry's attention to detail meant Neville rarely made a big mistake, despite his fear of Snape, and Neville's magic meant the potions worked much better.

It only took a few lessons for Professor Snape to decide all class practicals would be solo exercises from then on.

"Mr Potter, I afraid if you can't transfigure a match in to a pin, you will never move onto the larger more interesting transfigurations, like making a pincushion out of a hedgehog."

Harry sighed and prodded the stubborn matchstick with his wand. It still refused to do anything needle-like whatsoever. Not that it made much sense to change it anyway. What was the point in starting with two things so fundamentally different anyway?

By now, everybody else had moved onto bigger things, but Harry was still stuck with a plain old match.

Maybe he was trying to do too much. Maybe he could just make it bit sharp to begin with, and then move on from there, one miniscule change at a time. That seemed to be more in the range of his capabilities.

Harry's feather barely stirred on the desk. Just like in Transfiguration, he was drastically behind the rest of the class when it came to the actual casting. Even Neville was better at it, but one thing Harry learned at the Dursleys was to keep trying, no matter what, otherwise he would never get to where he wanted to be. Crying it was all unfair or too hard, and waiting for somebody else to do it for him, was Dudley's game.

Harry would never accept any similarity between him and his cousin.

"V-V-Vampires? Eep!" squeaked the bad smelling man wearing the turban. "Why do you w-w-want to know about V-V-Vampires?"

Harry sighed in exasperation. So far, Defence Against the Dark Arts was a joke. Professor Quirrell appeared terrified of his own shadow.

The texts were comprehensive and quite thorough, but the Professor stumbled and mumbled his way through them at a rate that often left young minds drifting into more interesting areas, generally not school related.

The spells really interested Harry, mainly because he had more success with them than any others. He was still bottom of the class, but the gap was significantly smaller.

"I remember you saying you were going to pick up a new book when I met you in Diagon Alley, and I had some questions that are not covered in our text..." explained Harry.

He wasn't going to admit the real reason was that Harry and his friends wanted to investigate if Professor Snape really was some sort of Vampire.

"S-s-s-s-sorry, P-p-p-potter," stuttered the professor. "I n-never g-got around t-to it."

Harry thanked the professor and left the class. He could do all of the homework and get most of the few spells they were taught working, but he couldn't shake the feeling there was something going on between Snape and Quirrell.

If it wasn't the garlic, maybe it was something to do with the fact both professors seem to loath being anywhere near Harry. While he had no idea why either of them felt the way they did, it didn't bother him in the slightest, having been conditioned to that sort of behaviour by life with the Dursleys.

At least Quirrell tried to hide it.

"UP" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom didn't even twitch. By his fourth try, everybody else's was in their hand, so Harry quickly bent over and picked it up.

Before Madam Hooch could give the signal, Neville floated above their heads and then fell off, breaking his wrist.

"Give it here!" Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt onto his broomstick and taken off. He hadn't been lying, he could fly well. Hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, "Come and get it, Potter!"

Harry grabbed his broom.

"No!" shouted Hermione Granger. "Madam Hooch told us not to move -- you'll get us all into trouble."

Harry looked ready to argue, but then nodded his head.

"Sorry, Malfoy," he shouted at the smirking blonde boy. "You're the only one stupid enough to want to get expelled for a Remembrall."

Malfoy turned red with anger, and he was about to reply when a piercing voice called out his name.

"Draco Malfoy!" shouted Professor McGonagall, from a second floor window overlooking the pitch. "You land immediately and come directly to my office right now, young man. I distinctly heard Madam Hooch warn you to stay grounded."

"Thanks, Hermione," whispered Harry, as the now very pale and shaking Draco Malfoy walked fearfully from the pitch to the jeers and laughter of the Gryffindors. "I owe you one."

"I'd take you on anytime on my own," said Malfoy. "Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only, no contact. What's the matter? Never heard of a wizard's duel before, I suppose?"

"Malfoy," asked Harry innocently. "Don't you think I am a squib?"

Malfoy smiled nastily. "Everybody knows it, Potter. Only reason you are here is because Dumbledore is so senile he can't see it for himself."

"So you want to fight me in a wizard's duel because you are certain I can't possibly hurt you, right? You realise that just makes you a bully,



don't you? You don't think there is a hope in hell I could hurt you, so you aren't afraid to duel with me, right?"

Malfoy's smile got slightly sickly. "I'll teach you manners, Potter."

"Right," said Harry. "I know just how to handle bullies."

With that, he suddenly kicked the Malfoy heir in the robes.

As Draco bent double, Harry brought his knee up and into Draco's face, breaking the boy's nose with a horrifying crunching sound.

Harry usually preferred to run from Dudley and his gang, but getting caught often enough meant he knew a bit about how to fight, and a lot about how to fight dirty.

Crabbe and Goyle had barely started moving when Harry leapt at Goyle, sinking his elbow into the larger boy's face.

Ron, initially stunned by Harry's sudden violence, finally got into the act, just as Crabbe reached out to grab Harry who was still recovering from his flying attack on Goyle.

While Ron was significantly smaller than his target, he grew up in a house filled with older, stronger, and somewhat rough brothers. This taught him how to maximise his limited resources. The running head butt caught Crabbe in the stomach, dropping him, badly winded, to the floor next to his two companions.

Harry grabbed the whimpering Draco's hair, and lifted his head off the floor.

"I don't need magic to beat you, Malfoy, you loser."

"What's going on here?" came the voice of authority, over the excited whispers of the crowd gathered in the hallway.

Harry sighed and let Malfoy's head fall back to the ground with a thump.

Just like whenever he fought back and injured Dudley or one of his gang, Harry was still going to end up paying the price for success.

Filch watched the boy-who-lived with mixed emotions. On one hand, he was one of those despised students; one of the disgusting, filthy wretches who showed no respect and constantly made a mess wherever they went.

On the other hand, the boy never complained about serving his detention, never secretly tried to use his wand to complete the laborious cleaning tasks, and never spoke back to the caretaker, no matter what was said. He worked diligently and hard, doing as good a job as the caretaker himself could do.

And, he was practically a squib.

Filch heard what the professors said in the off hours; how they lamented the boy's lack of magical prowess as if it was the most pitiful thing they could imagine, and quite frankly it made him sick.

Half of them went to extraordinary lengths to try to coax more out of the boy, seeming to think the treatment his Muggle relatives gave him somehow suppressed a huge magical potential, and that kind words and encouragement might reverse the damage.

Except Severus Snape, of course; He practically delighted in the 'failure' of his most hated adversary's son, as if always losing out to Potter senior and his gang made the treatment of Harry justified.

Filch hated them all for it.

"It's near enough ten o'clock, lad. You can stop now," he said.

Harry looked up from his position, then back at the section of floor he was cleaning with a worn out brush. For a second, Filch thought he was going to insist on completing the small part left to do, but then resignedly put the brush back in the bucket and stood up without argument, ready to pack it all away.

"Thank you, Mr Filch," said Harry.

He was always polite too, Filch noted as they walked back to his office. He was in little doubt the boy really wanted to finish the floor, but would not argue with the caretaker about it.

Argus knew enough to see the boy had not enjoyed a happy childhood.

Whether it was just like it had been for Argus himself, because he had almost no magical ability, or if it was something more sinister, Filch could see what the other faculty appeared to either have missed, or refused to accept.

Harry Potter had been beaten almost into submission.

Watching as the boy carefully and meticulously cleaned and put away everything, exactly as he had been shown, Argus suddenly realised he too felt bad that the boy shared his fate, and wanted to do something to help, despite his loathing at the very thought that a Squib needed help.

“Potter,” he said. “Come into my office, I’ve got something to show you.”

Kwikspell A Correspondence Course in Beginners' Magic was the name on the large, glossy, purple envelopes filling up a box in Harry's trunk.

Filch showed Harry the advertisements, and then helped fill in the order form, showing him how to authorise the money for the course to be taken from his Gringotts vault.

Now, weeks later, Harry was reaping the benefits.

The simple and precise instructions brought out the best results Harry had ever achieved, despite all of the personal training and tuition his Professor's seem to heap upon him.

Little tricks and explanations, like exactly how and why wand movements were important, let Harry squeeze the most out of his

meagre magical power. Perfect pronunciation taught by extensive phonetic instructions gained him another minimal increase, as did clear visualisations of the effect, and focussed intention.

To a normal strength witch or wizard, slight deviations from the perfect form still meant more than enough magical energy was available to complete the spell. To low powered individuals like Harry, it was the difference between success and failure.

There was also a multitude of spells with shorter or easier to remember incantations that required less energy to produce similar effects as the ones taught at school, making them perfect for people like Harry.

He was, however, very careful to keep his correspondence course hidden from his dorm mates.

"Hagrid," asked Harry. "Why aren't you allowed to do magic?"

"Never you mind that, young 'arry," said Hagrid, as he filled the enormous cup with tea. "Just you stick with it lad. I've no doubt you'll be a great wizard someday."

"Right, but maybe you can show me how you do a few things around here, without using magic?" he asked hopefully.

Harry didn't hesitate at the door, but walked right in. Years of getting pushed into the girl's lavatory by Dudley made Harry fairly immune to any embarrassment he may have felt following the crying Hermione.

"Hermione," he said, ignoring her stuttering protests at his presence outside the stall she had locked herself in. "You shouldn't cry. Don't let Ron upset you; he is just jealous of how good you are in every class."

It took Harry several more minutes, but eventually she unlocked her door and came out to talk to him.

"How do you do it?" she asked. "How can you stand everybody insulting you and whispering nasty things about you when they think

you can't hear them? Or Professor Snape and all of the terrible things he says and does to you? How can you just stand there and take it?"

Harry shrugged. "I just don't care," he answered. "If all they are doing is talking, I don't care. I spent my whole life hearing things like that, so it doesn't bother me anymore."

He laughed ruefully.

"They think I should be upset because I can barely get a light from my wand, but I think it's the greatest miracle in the world! I can do magic!"

An hour later, as they were leaving the toilet to go join the feast, they ran into the troll.

"I don't know any spells that would defeat a troll," cried Hermione, as the troll started moving towards them.

"How's this one?" said Harry, grabbing her arm and starting to drag her down the corridor. "We disappear. Run!"

No lumbering Troll could hope to keep up with the sprinting pair.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi. His panic fading now that there was no sound of Filch and Snape, Harry moved nearer to the mirror, wanting to look at himself but see no reflection again. He stepped in front of it.

Just as he expected, the mirror simply reflected the empty classroom behind him.

Slipping out of the door, Harry thought he heard a soft, disappointed murmur from somewhere inside the room.

"They're not birds!" Harry said suddenly. "They're keys! Winged keys -- look carefully. So that must mean..." he looked around the chamber

while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. "... yes -- look! Broomsticks! You've got to catch the key to the door!"

"But there are hundreds of them!" Ron examined the lock on the door. "We're looking for a big, old-fashioned one -- probably silver, like the handle."

Ron and Hermione seized a broomstick each and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one.

"This is impossible!" yelled Ron as another key avoided his grasp.

Harry examined the door more closely. Taking the third broom, he jammed the end under the door, and tried to lift it off its hinges. The door rose a few centimetres, but he didn't have the leverage to get it higher.

"Guys, come here," he called excitedly after a few minutes of trying.

With the other two brooms and the added weight of his friends, the door was soon lying on the floor inside of the next room, and it only cost them one broom that snapped under the pressure.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" said Ron. "We've got to play our way across the room."

Behind the white pieces, they could see another door.

"How?" said Hermione nervously.

"I think," said Ron, "we're going to have to be the missing chessmen."

"Like fun," said Harry.

Racing back to where the door lay on the floor, Harry grabbed the two remaining brooms and returned them to his friends.

“Hermione can fly well enough on her own, but sorry, Ron, you are going to have to carry me over the set,” he said. “Just be sure to go up as high as you can.”

Harry stared at the seven bottles in front of him, while Ron and Hermione argued about who should go forward and who should go back.

“There’s not enough for more than one person to go on,” said Harry, cutting into the argument.

“You can’t on alone, Harry,” said Hermione, Ron nodding in agreement.

“Nope, I got a better idea,” he said, smiling broadly as he picked up the bottle Hermione said would get them through the fire and back into the Troll room. “Cup your hands, and be careful not to spill any. Hermione, hold out both of your hands please. You have to hold mine too.”

Confused, his friends nevertheless complied, and soon held the precious contents of the bottle in their hands. Moving quickly but carefully, Harry filled the now empty bottle with a bit from each of the three poisonous ones.

“Right, drink up and let’s go,” he said.

Ron still looked confused. “You’re not going in?”

Harry smiled. “Nope, I’m coming back with you two.”

“What about Snape then? You are going to let him get the Stone?”

“Yep, but when he comes out, he will grab the bottle he knows is the one that’ll let him through the fire...”

“And cark it on his own brew,” finished Ron. “Brilliant!”

Hermione looked ready to argue, but ended up sighing loudly. "I suppose it's the best we can do," she said. "I just hope it really isn't poison, and only knocks him out for a few hours or something."

"Fat chance of the slimy git using anything that doesn't result in a painful death," whispered Ron to Harry, as they dashed from the room before the ice-cold feeling left them.

Harry nodded in silent agreement.

"Hope you have -- er -- a good holiday," said Hermione, looking uncertainly after Uncle Vernon, shocked that anyone could be so unpleasant.

"Oh, I will," said Harry, and they were surprised at the grin that was spreading over his face as he padded a pocket stuffed with Zonko's products he had bought from the twins. "They don't know I can't really do much magic. I'm going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer...."

Finite.



Year two

“Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts!”

Harry looked at the manic creature and knew what he had to do in order to avoid more trouble. Vernon and his dinner guests were downstairs, and any further noises would undoubtedly result in more than just a verbal barrage of abuse.

Years of bullying by Dudley and his gang had the dubious honour of helping Harry become quite skilled in the art of negotiation. The ability to appear to give in to demands while actually securing a victory was almost second nature to him, so instead of continuing to argue with the strange creature, Harry automatically fell into his well practiced routine.

Slumping his shoulders in apparent defeat, he carefully considered what small concession he could ask for that, on the surface, was sure to look like nothing more meaningful than a further acceptance of his fate.

“Okay, but only if you take a letter to Professor Dumbledore for me,” he said.

The House-elf looked torn between happiness and fear. “Dobby cannot, Mr Harry Potter sir,” it squeaked.

“Well if I don’t write him, he will most likely come and force me to go, and then I’ll be in this great danger you have told me about. I’d send my owl but she is locked in her cage, so you will have to take the letter to him,” insisted Harry, as he hurriedly grabbed some paper and a pen to write a quick message.

Stuffing it into an envelope and quickly addressing it, Harry held it out to the worried elf.

“You have to make sure to give it to him in person, or he might think this is a joke or something, and you should probably wait for a reply, just to be sure he understands.”

The elf looked at the envelope hesitantly, so Harry gave him an extra push.

“Look, if you really don’t want me to go to Hogwarts, you’ll have to help me out, okay?”

Eventually the elf reluctantly agreed, and disappeared with the letter.

Downstairs, Harry heard Uncle Vernon roaring with fake laughter. Somehow he doubted if anybody could be impressed with the obese man, and if the deal fell through, Harry was bound to be blamed, no matter what the real reason.

He hoped that at least the headmaster would get his letter and investigate the strange elf and his dire warning.

Harry’s workload of chores remained almost as huge as ever, although much of the cooking was no longer done by him, not after he ‘accidentally’ mentioned poisoning his defence professor at school. When he was required to cook, he had to eat first to prove it was safe, meaning he was better fed this summer than ever before.

He also didn’t have to worry about his blubber-headed cousin pestering him, or having his things locked away in the cupboard again, not after a Dungbomb or two somehow found their way into Dudley’s room.

Dungbombs were Harry’s new best friend.

Petunia knew he couldn’t do magic on purpose outside of school, but even Dudley caught on to the fact that bad things involving horrid smells seem to happen (to him especially) whenever anybody upset Harry.

It was quite intriguing to Harry to prove the Dursley’s could learn something new. Luckily they weren’t bright enough to work out just how deliberate and staged some of those ‘incidents’ really were.

After all, like any good magician, Harry knew timing was everything. “Diagon Alley,” said Harry, stepping into the emerald green flames.

Nothing happened.

Harry stepped out of the fire and back into the Weasley's living room where the remaining members of the family stood looking shocked.

"Never mind, dear," said Mrs Weasley, holding out the pot. "Just try again. Maybe say it a bit louder this time."

Harry nodded and grabbed another pinch of powder.

"Diagon Alley."

Again nothing happened, and Harry walked back into the same room he had left just moments before. There was no mistaking the look of worry on the elder Weasley's faces now. Ron looked confused, and Ginny scared.

"Maybe it's broken," suggested Ron. "Let me have a go."

The fire roared and whipped Ron out of sight.

"Guess not," said Harry. "Sod this."

He grabbed a large handful of powder and tossed it into the fire. "DIAGONALLEY" he shouted as loud as he could while leaping into the green flames.

This time something happened, but unfortunately, Harry forgot to keep his elbows tucked in.

"HARRY! What d'yeh think yer doin' down there?" said Hagrid. "ere what's that smell?"

"Came out the wrong Floo exit," coughed Harry. It was several seconds before the acrid cloud of foul smelling gas cleared enough for him to breathe properly.

"Yer a mess!" said Hagrid gruffly, brushing soot off Harry so forcefully he nearly knocked him into a barrel of dragon dung outside an apothecary. "Skulkin' around Knockturn Alley, I dunno dodgy place, Harry - don' want no one ter see yeh down there."

"Thanks, Hagrid. Malfoy and his dad nearly saw me, but luckily I still had some Dungbombs left over from the Weasley's."

"Is that why yer stink worse than me manure pile, and why everyone's running away from yer?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "I panicked and used the last lot to get some of the friendlier locals away from me. Wonderful invention those Dungbombs, but I'm all out now."

"Well let's go gettin' a few more then eh? Can't 'ave yer going back to school empty 'anded now, can we?"

Harry smiled and headed out into Diagon Alley with his large escort, confident nothing would dare harm him now. He silently reminded himself to buy the Weasley's a really big bag of Floo powder, since it looked like he needed to use a bit more than the usual wizard.

Dungbombs came first though, and maybe a few fireworks too. "Nice big smile, Harry," said Lockhart, through his own gleaming teeth. "Together, you and I are worth the front page."

"Not bleeding likely," mumbled Harry, reaching into the pocket of his robes containing his newly replenished supply of Dungbombs.

Within seconds the store was abandoned. It was not until somebody with a bubble-head charm went in and cast several air-purifying spells, that customers and staff alike were able to return.

Gilderoy Lockhart lay unconscious on the floor, a smashed camera lying near his purpling, bruised head. Whether caught in the crush of the panicked escape, or if something more nefarious occurred, nobody could say.

By the time anybody thought of him, Harry Potter was long gone. "Ow!" yelled Ron as he crashed into the barrier with Harry.

After a few minutes of fruitless trying to get through the solid wall, Harry righted his baggage and sat on the edge of the cart.

“Harry, what are you doing? We are going to miss the train!” said Ron, watching the large clock tick away the remaining time before the Hogwarts express left the station.

Petunia drilled into Dudley time and time again what to do if he ever became separated from her in the shops – stop where he was and wait for her to come back. It was advice neither Dudley nor Harry ever once followed; Dudley because he was usually running away when Petunia was not going where he wanted, and Harry because he had no doubt Petunia would just leave him behind, again.

“Relax, Ron,” answered Harry calmly. “I doubt if your parents are going to just forget and leave us here. If worse come to worse, we can always send Hedwig with a note to get help.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Ron, sitting down next to Harry. “But I really hope we don’t miss the feast.”

“Harry, I can’t believe you used Dungbombs to disrupt Professor Lockhart’s lesson again!” said Hermione angrily. “I thought they were all confiscated after you used them to ruin his werewolf story.”

“Oh please, Hermione. As if I didn’t have another five bags stashed away. Do you really think I would be so stupid as to carry my whole supply around with me?”

Hermione frowned. “And I suppose you have more fireworks too, despite your vehement denial at Professor Snape’s accusation that you sabotaged Malfoy’s cauldron?”

“Technically, I didn’t do it,” said Harry, smiling mischievously. “Neville did the actual throwing, I just gave him the last of the ones I had on me. So I wasn’t lying at all.”

“What about Zabini’s book-bag then? Everybody saw you pointing your wand at it, just before it launched itself off the balcony and exploded.”

“Dean Thomas. I provided the distraction, while he lit the fuse. That’s why I didn’t get detention. They checked my wand and couldn’t prove

I did anything. Not that I can cast a spell that powerful anyway. Hell, even lighting the rockets is hard for me, that's why the Weasley's and I am working on an alternative for them."

Hermione frowned even more.

"You have been spending a lot of time with Ron's brothers, haven't you?" she asked suspiciously.

"They have been helping me with my potions too," Harry explained. "You wouldn't believe how much of a difference a bit of enthusiasm can make to a potion - something to do with magic reacting better if you are really into it. While I have a lot of experience, I never found cooking at the Dursley's to be very enjoyable, you see, and that attitude has passed on into my potion making."

"And they are providing you with some sort of incentive then?"

"They do have the most wonderful ideas for new products."

"Duelling club? You must be joking, Ron. I think I get into enough trouble around here without purposely joining a club that specialises in teaching us to attack each other, don't you?" said Harry, after reading the notice on the board.

To Harry, any form of organised competition involving the remotest possibility of violence was loathsome. Years of schooling with Dudley imbued that dislike in him, through a special brand of aversion therapy.

"But, Harry, they might teach how to fight properly. What if Malfoy learns how to really fight, and we don't?" asked Ron.

"Hmm. Good point. Tell you what, you go ask McGonagall who is running the club, and so long it is not Snape or Locky-head, I'm in. Otherwise we can just ask somebody else what they covered and if it was any good, because quite frankly, I'd rather be playing chess, despite the fact your pieces can barely hear me." said Harry.

Ron blanched as he considered the possibility of either the incompetent Defence professor, or the vicious Potion's master, being in charge of a room full of students learning how to hex each other.

"Blimey, Harry. Do you always have to think of the bad side of things?" he asked.

"Comes with the territory, Ron," said Harry, pointing at his scar. "Comes with the territory."

Colin Creevy poked at the newly developed photo. It looked perfect, except that the main subject of the picture refused to budge and stood perfectly still, despite the goings on around him.

Every photo he took of his favourite subject, Harry Potter, was identical. Colin knew he wasn't doing anything wrong, since everybody else in the photos were moving around properly, but Harry's picture looked even more Muggle than a Muggle photo.

With a resigned sigh, Colin tossed the photos into the bin and began to clear up his dark room. He idolised Harry before coming to Hogwarts, but his hero's steadfast refusal to do anything remotely extraordinary took its toll on Colin's enthusiasm.

Most of the time, Harry was barely even ordinary.

Colin heard all the rumours about how the boy-who-lived was almost a squib, but he hadn't believed it, until now. The failure of his photos was the last straw. Photography was an even bigger passion for Colin, and if it meant he had to find another subject for his obsession, so be it.

Maybe Ginny Weasley would let him take some shots. The read-headed girl was a bit shy and could do with some cheering up. As the first girl born to the Weasley family for a very long time, she was bound to be an interesting subject, and her magnificent, bright red hair made for interesting contrasts in his shots.

Busying himself with plans for approaching Ron's younger sister, Colin never saw the images of Harry Potter as they visibly relaxed their hard-held stances and slumped in relief.

For a brief moment, Harry was sure he could hear the strange voice again. The barely audible sentences didn't sound like any ghost he had encountered so far, but since the castle was chock-full of weird and wonderful things, he wasn't all that concerned.

"So what did you say to Nick, Harry?" asked Ron, shovelling another plateful of food from the Halloween feast into his mouth. "I thought for sure he was going to ask you to his death-day party or something."

"He probably did," answered Harry. "I couldn't really hear him. Fancy being upset because your head hasn't been cut off completely. Nuts I tell you, completely nuts."

"Mr Filch," said Harry, quite hesitantly. "I just wanted to say that I am really sorry about Mrs. Norris."

Pets were special to Harry. It was not a hard stretch for him to imagine how he would feel if something happened to his beloved Hedwig.

"Thank you, lad. Coming from anybody else, I'd take that differently, but I know you mean it," sniffed the caretaker.

"We will be brewing up a potion that'll make her well again. I know I'm not much good, but you are welcome to whatever I can make, if it will help."

Argus sniffed again, loudly. It was very rare anybody made any sort of effort on his behalf, and it touched him deeply.

"You just be making sure you stay where you are meant to be, young Harry," he said, more gently than he had spoken to any student in a very long time. "No after hours gallivanting around this year, eh?"

"No, sir," agreed Harry. "Not unless you wanted some company on your walks. I mean, with Mrs Norris not available for a while, I thought maybe you could do with somebody to talk to sometimes? Just for an hour or two, maybe, now and then?"

The crooked smile of the old man was a sight Harry would not forget anytime soon. Ron was never going to believe him.



“Aye, lad. That would be much appreciated, but only if your head of house agrees, mind.”

Harry only felt slightly bad as he ran off to find Professor McGonagall. After all, just because he fully intended on abusing the ability to leave the dorm after curfew, he really would spend time with Mr Filch, keeping him company. The old man knew more about the secret passages of the castle than anybody, except possibly the headmaster.

And Harry intended on learning all that he could.

“Here’s a thought, Hermione,” said Harry. “Instead of going to all this effort to get a pass to the restricted section, why not just owl-order the book we need?”

“I doubt if they would sell a highly dangerous book to school children, Harry,” huffed Hermione.

“Who said you had to tell them who it’s for?” asked Harry. “Just send Hedwig with the money and ask her to wait until they have it ready. I’ll pay for it.”

Hermione bit her lip in concentration. “That might work,” she finally conceded. “And we could also order any ingredients we need once we have the formula.”

“I wonder if you can just buy the finished product,” asked Ron. “Save us a lot of mucking about.”

Both Harry and Hermione stared at Ron like he had grown another head.

“What?” he asked. “Can’t I have a good idea every now and then too?”

Harry picked up the diary, again.

Though, while living with the Dursleys, Harry was only ever allowed to watch television undisturbed while at Mrs Figs, Dudley’s obsession with the box gave Harry ample opportunity to witness the effects it had on susceptible minds.

Even just hearing advertisements while in his cupboard, with their subtle words, catchy tunes, and tantalising half-promises, and then seeing how Dudley felt the sudden need for whatever product was been hawked, taught Harry a valuable lesson in temptation and trickery.

Every now and then, he felt a slight urge to pick up the book and write in it, but the vague feeling that T.M. Riddle was somebody he wanted to know never had a chance against somebody who consciously made sure to be immune to such manipulations.

Harry shrugged and dropped the book into his trunk.

Besides, keeping a diary seemed like such a girl thing to do.  
"Oy, you! 'Arty Potter!" shouted a particularly grim-looking dwarf, elbowing people out of the way to get to Harry.

"I've got a musical message to deliver to 'Arry Potter in person," he said, twanging his harp in a threatening sort of way.

"Not here," Harry hissed, noticing the hallway crowded with first years.  
"I'll give you five galleons to give it to me in private."

The surly cupid stopped strumming the harp. "Five?"

"Five," assured Harry, already secretly reaching into his pocket, in case plan 'A' failed.

"All right," said the dwarf. "I'll be back later, then. Make sure you have the cash, or else!" He twanged his harp menacingly again.

Then he turned and forced his way back through the crowd, obviously intent on his next victim. Harry let out a sigh of relief. Several of the first years gathered around him giggled loudly.

So Harry dropped a few Dungbombs anyway.  
Professor McGonagall looked over the top of her glasses and gave Harry a very considered glare.

“Career counselling is not normally undertaken until fifth year, Mr Potter,” she said, not unkindly. “However I think I understand your motives in coming to me, and I must say you are showing a wisdom beyond your years in doing so.”

Harry blushed at the stern Professor’s praise.

“It’s just that I really have no idea about most of the subjects on offer,” he said. “I was going to sign up for the same as Ron, so that I at least had somebody friendly in the class to help me, but Percy and Hermione convinced me to take it all a bit more seriously, and , er, well, I figured my problem might be a bit of a limiting factor.”

“Very sensible Mr Potter, now let’s take a look at what you have chosen so far, shall we? Well, although Divination does not require any usual magical talent whatsoever, I can’t say I agree with it being a sensible choice...”

Two hours later, Harry left the Deputy head-mistress’s room with a list of subjects that followed Percy’s advice, and played to his strengths. Now all he had to do was convince Ron to do the same courses.

Even if he didn’t though, Professor McGonagall assured him Hermione at least would be in all of them.

The quiet murmurs and whispering, that normally started whenever Harry entered a room, erupted furiously as soon as Draco and his ever present goons came in.

“Shush!” snapped the irritable librarian, Madame Pince.

“What’s all that about?” Ron asked Harry, watching Draco scowl and stomp over to a desk where several other Slytherins were seated.

“I figured the rumour mill wasn’t getting value for money with me and all this Heir of Slytherin tripe,” answered Harry. “So I had the twins start spreading a few storied about Draco.”

Ron smiled, and Hermione gave up on her act of pretending to study, to look at Harry curiously.

“What have they been saying?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing much. Just that Draco is part Veela and so is probably next on Slytherin’s hit list, since he hated half-monster creatures even more than half-Muggle wizards,” answered Harry.

School yard rumour and local folk lore were used against Harry so often during his time at Muggle primary school, that he knew intimately how to play the game. Draco was barely an amateur in comparison.

“That doesn’t seem enough, Harry,” said Hermione suspiciously. “What else did you do?”

“Oh, and I might have given them a bit of Malfoy’s hair and the remaining Polyjuice potion, then let Parkinson and Greengrass overhear a conversation where Draco told me he had chosen me for his life mate, was deeply in love with me, but ashamed to let anybody know, hated you guys for keeping us apart, and would never let anything bad happen to me, even if it meant making all of us half-bloods leave the school.”

Ron nearly choked and was only saved from expulsion from the library by Draco himself causing an unacceptable disturbance.

“I DID NOT!” Draco shrieked at his former allies.

Madam Pince raced towards him, a look to quell the most fearsome of hearts twisting her normally dour face.

“Did I mention the midnight trysts?” Harry added.

“... Good-bye, friend of Hagrid,” rasped the massive spider.

Harry knew spiders. Long hours of watching them in his cupboard gave him an insight into their nature that would rival many professional researchers, though he had never recognised or formalised his knowledge.

The moment Harry had heard the words ‘Our kind like the dark and the quiet’ his hand went into one of his many pockets. It emerged

now, not with his wand, but with the largest rocket in his collection. Light and noise affected different spiders differently, but it affected them all, one way or the other.

Harry really hoped this lot reacted one way in particular.

Before the solid wall of spiders had a chance to move, Harry pressed the special switch previously added to the bottom in place of the wand activated trigger.

Immediately, a loud whistling and blaze of light shot up into the night, before a deafening crack sounded, and blinding coloured lights flooded the area in rolling waves of light and noise. Spiders rushed everywhere, trying desperately to get away from the bright, noisy explosions.

Dodging amongst them, Harry, Ron, and Fang, sprinted, determined to make the most of the confusion. Harry already had another rocket in his hand, and passed a third to Ron.

“Fire it off the second it gets darks again,” he told the red-head. “Whatever happens, don’t stop running.”

Ron nodded, too scared to speak.

When they finally emerged from the forest near Hagrid’s hut, they were both too exhausted to do anything more than collapse behind the locked and bolted door.

Fang crawled into his basket and hid under a blanket, while Ron found a bucket and was violently sick.

It was many minutes before the felt brave enough to don the cloak and venture back to the castle, wiser in many ways for the adventure, but more appreciative of Mr Zonko and his marvellous products than ever before.

Once all the teachers left the staff room, Harry and Ron exited the ugly wardrobe.

"We should still tell them," Harry suddenly said. "We should let them know where the entrance to the Chamber is, and what the beast is. Maybe it's not too late!"

Ron nodded excitedly. "Let's go find McGonagall."

"You go find her, and I'll go get that git Lockhart. He might be useless, but you can be sure he'll tell everyone everything he knows. They might not listen to us because we are kids, but somebody will pay attention to him if he is shooting his mouth off like normal."

Ron agreed and rushed off towards down the corridor while Harry headed for the D.A.D.A Professor's offices.

Harry reached his wand just in time. Lockhart brought his wand down at exactly the same moment as Harry bellowed, "Expelliarmus!"

There was a blinding flash as Lockhart's wand exploded with the force of a small bomb. Harry flew backwards and crashed against the wall of the room; a curious dullness settling over his mind.

He picked up his wand and looked at Lockhart lying unconscious several feet away. Harry felt that he had to do something, something that involved Ginny and the girl's toilet, but he couldn't quite figure out what was going on. There was a sense of urgency though, a need to do something quickly, but exactly what, he wasn't sure.

With a strange sort of detachment, he started heading towards the second floor. As he walked, ideas began filling his head. He remembered he was going to talk to Myrtle about the day she died, and hopefully find the entrance to the Chamber where Ginny was, but not much else seemed clear.

With each step, the plan solidified and became more certain. He was going down into the chamber to save Ginny, although how exactly, was still a bit fuzzy.

Any memory of waiting for Ron or the Professor's to join him completely evaded his thoughts.

"KILL THE BOY! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU. SNIFF -- SMELL HIM."

At the word 'smell', something clicked in Harry's brain. The giant snake's tongue flicked, tasting the air, just as a handful of Dungbombs exploded all around it.

The Basilisk went berserk.

It thrashed its massive coils, smashing the statues lining the chamber in a frenzy of twisting and thrusting.

Harry grabbed Ginny's arm and started dragging her from the chamber, desperate to get out of the way of the apparently insane animal.

"STOP! LISTEN TO ME. HE IS GETTING AWAY," screamed Riddle angrily, waving the old diary in the air as if trying to make the blinded beast see him, but the monster kept its contorting. In a rage, the almost solid figure of Tom Riddle fired a spell at the creature, possibly trying to get its attention.

In that, he was far too successful.

Stung by whatever spell Riddle threw, the monster swung its mammoth head back around and bit down on what it must have perceived as the source of its torment – Tom Riddle.

A long, dreadful, piercing scream echoed through the chamber, and then the mammoth head of the basilisk rose up.

Harry reached deep into his magically expanded, secret pocket, and pulled out all of his remaining rockets. The King of the Snakes opened its mouth wide, as if it had just swallowed something too hot, and Harry, pressing the manual trigger on the bottom of one of the rockets, tossed the entire bag into the gaping maw.

He threw his body over that of Ginny Weasley, instinctively protecting the unconscious girl. A cascade of blood, gore, and strangely, ink, washed over Harry and Ginny, as the creature's head erupted in an iridescent explosion that left spots in Harry's closed eyes.

The headless body of the snake landed next to them with a resounding splash, dousing them both in foul water.

"Professor Dumbledore, why did the Dungbombs have such an effect on the Basilisk?" asked Harry. "Its not like the thing lived somewhere that didn't already smell like a sewer."

"Harry, do you know what the main component of your favourite prank is?" asked the Headmaster, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Chicken Manure," answered Harry instantly. His extra 'study' with the twins provided many little titbits of unusual knowledge.

"And what is the one thing a Basilisk will flee from?" asked Professor Dumbledore.

Harry thought about what it said on the scrap of paper he found in Hermione's hand. Realisation came to him. "Roosters," he answered, smiling.

"Now imagine how the beast must have felt when, after being blinded, it was suddenly inundated with the concentrated scent of the one thing in the world it fears above all else."

"I almost feel sorry for it," said Harry. "Almost."

"Your aunt and uncle will be proud, though, won't they?" said Hermione as they got off the train and joined the crowd thronging toward the enchanted barrier. "When they hear what you did this year?"

"Nope," laughed Harry. "They'll be furious that I survived."

And together they walked back through the gateway to the Muggle world, neither of his friends knowing anything about the vials of Polyjuice potion or the extra packets of Dungbombs filling several magical, concealed pockets of Harry's clothes.

The End (of Year two).

Want more? Let me know. Reviews and Comments appreciated.



Thanks for all of the reviews, comments, and encouragement, and to IP82 and the others at AFC for their ongoing help. Looks like this idea might stretch a Hogwarts year or two more. I am trying really hard not to let it become a crack-fic with really silly bits, but it is getting harder to do!

It's safe to assume lots of canon or canon equiavent stuff happens "off-camera".

### Year Three

For the first time, Harry was enjoying his summer holidays.

The judicious use of Dungbombs, and several other Zonko brand pranks, ensured his relatives were too terrified to bother him much, especially after Harry commented on how it would be a shame for Uncle Vernon's new car to lose that 'new car' smell too soon.

He had completed all of his homework early, having decided to take Hermione's advice and get it over and done with, and Dudley was mortally afraid of Harry after Harry accidentally left a Blood-pop where the obese boy could find and try eating it.

Discovering his cousin enjoyed blood flavoured sweets isn't what made Dudley afraid though. It was Harry's comment that it actually belonged to a Vampire friend who might be coming to visit and would be upset if Harry didn't have anything for him to snack on.

When Dudley threatened to go to his parents about it, Harry pointed out the Vampire was several centuries old and would not take well to any unkind comments Vernon or Petunia would undoubtedly make if they were to hear of the creature's visit.

To be sure, Harry used some of his purchased Polyjuice potion and pretended first to be Vernon, and then later, Petunia. The dire promises of retribution should Dudley not treat Harry well were enough to complete Dudley's nightmare, especially when each 'parent' insisted on complete secrecy and a vow never to talk about the conversation again.

So far, everything was working out well, but now news that Aunt Marge insisted on coming to visit arrived. Marge had a peculiar ability to get under Harry's skin with her biting comments. Something about the way she berated him really 'got his goat', and made him angrier than anything else ever did.

Her mangy mutts were another matter, but Harry had a plan to counter any beast she brought this visit. A plan he felt sure would finally turn the tables on his antagonists this time. Hedwig had not returned from visiting Hagrid yet, but Harry was sure she would be back before Marge arrived that night, and hopefully she would have what he needed to take care of Marge's dogs, once and for all.

That just left him trying to figure a way to keep Vernon's brute of a sister off his case.

Ripper began to growl again as Harry sat down.

"So!" barked Vernon's horror of a sister, Marge. "Still here, are you?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Don't you say 'yes' in that ungrateful tone," Aunt Marge growled. "It's damn good of Vernon and Petunia to – Ripper? What's the matter boy? Ripper?"

Marge's dog was not listening. It was in fact apparently trying to back as far away from Harry as it could, almost whimpering in fright at the sight of the skinny boy.

"Ripper, it's just the Potter brat. No need to be scared, sweetie," encouraged Marge, grabbing the terror-filled dog and trying to push him forward. "You remember Harry. You chased him up a tree.

"You, boy," she snapped at Harry. "Come here and hold out your hand so he can get a good sniff of you."

Vernon and Petunia appeared to be holding their breaths. They could tell something was happening, something unnatural, but they couldn't see that the boy had done anything. Petunia was already a bundle of tension after witnessing the dog slurping tea all over her polished

floor, and Vernon was always stressed whenever Harry was present anyway. Dudley sat smiling stupidly, thinking he was about to be witness to yet another 'Harry gets hurt' incident.

Harry obediently moved closer and slowly held out his hand, palm upwards, for the struggling dog to sniff. Before his hand got anywhere near enough for the animal to really catch his scent, Ripper exploded into a frenzy of biting and scratching that even the meaty hands of Marge could not contain.'

"Ripper!" shrieked Marge, as her favourite dog tore into her in a desperate bid to escape some unseen torment.

Finally freeing itself from her grasp, Ripper fell heavily to the floor; its tiny legs pumping furiously before it landed. It raced for the door leading into the backyard, leaving three stunned Dursleys, a panicking Aunt Marge, and a very satisfied Harry Potter behind.

Marge screamed in pain and fury as fresh blood spilled from her savaged hands.

Petunia screeched, the spatters of blood spraying over her normally immaculate kitchen finally pushing her over the edge and into hysterics.

Vernon roared at Harry, knowing the boy had somehow bewitched the dog.

Dudley sat, stupidly wondering what was going on.

And Harry smiled, knowing that although he was very unlikely to get his permission slip signed, he could forge Petunia's signature well enough that it didn't really matter anyway.

When he got back to school, he had to remember to tell Hagrid that the vial of Fluffy the three-headed dog's urine did indeed make a great base for a dog repellent potion, although he doubted Professor Snape was going to show any interest in his research.

Storming out of the house after finally having reached his limit, Harry immediately headed towards the local bus port.

He had nowhere to go, no Muggle money, no Hedwig (who he had foolishly sent off in the hope her absence would help keep his family calm), and no friends who were not currently abroad.

He could try to hitch a ride to London, but that was hardly safe, even for a wizard.

In summary, he was screwed.

Then again, he was wizard. Not much of a wizard, but a wizard nevertheless. Inside his trunk he had an invisibility cloak, a substantial number of Dungbombs and other Zonko's products, some leftover Polyjuice potion, and numerous magical or magic related artefacts, but nothing that would obviously help him get to London in the middle of the night.

If only he had some way of getting in contact with a wizard or two.

A slow smile crept over his face as he burrowed into his trunk and began hunting through his fireworks collection.

Behind him, deep in the shadows of an alleyway between two houses, a huge dog struggled to overcome the inexplicable fear invoked by the strange scene emanating from Harry's 'Ripper repellent' socks.

Harry never saw it.

Harry heard a loud crack moments before he spotted the robed figures rushing towards the park. Above them, the night sky glowed with obviously magical fireworks.

The two men stood directly under the magnificent display and waved their wands in the air. Almost immediately, all of the explosions and whistling ceased, and night time again fell over the sleepy suburb of Little Whinging. Only a few sleepy-eyed people came out of their identical houses, wearing identical confused looks, to watch the unexpected show. By tomorrow they would likely have forgotten anything except that there were fireworks in the middle of the night.

Trying to appear confident, Harry openly approached the two men.

“Hello,” he called as he got nearer, his voice surprising him. “Everything all right then?”

One of the figures took a few steps towards him, wand hastily tucked under the man’s robes. “Good evening, sir. Nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” said Harry, waving his hand. “I’m a wizard too. Saw the lights and thought I’d come to have a look at what was going on...”

“Looks like some kids setting off some of Zonko things again,” sighed the man, visibly relaxing after Harry identified himself as a fellow wizard. “You didn’t happen to see anybody near-by, did you?”

Harry tried to look thoughtful; not an easy thing to do while wearing Vernon’s face. Dudley’s clothes pulled tightly on his father’s larger frame, but Harry hoped the darkness would hide that.

“Nope, sorry,” he said, after a moment. “I just finished visiting a Muggle cousin of mine down the street there and was waiting for my lift to arrive when they went off.

“Say, you couldn’t tell me how I can get to London, could you? I think my ride has forgotten about me, and I am not from around here. I wouldn’t even know where to start to find a Floo connection...” Harry asked hopefully.

“Don’t like Apparition, eh? I can understand that. My wife refuses to travel that way too. You could always get the Knight-bus, that’ll usually come out this far.”

Harry cocked his head. “The Knight-bus, what’s that?”  
Tap. Tap. Tap.

Harry again beat his wand on what he was sure was the correct bricks to open the magical doorway into Diagon alley, but once again the magical portal refused to appear.

Twice already Harry had been forced to ask Tom to let him through; it was down right embarrassing. He was seriously considering going back up to his room and climbing out through the window, when a family came bustling out of the pub and into the alleyway. Sighing, Harry stepped aside to let the father open the portal.

It was with bitter satisfaction that he noted the man touched exactly the same bricks.

Two weeks. Two weeks without adult supervision. Two weeks without a bed time or tiresome chores. Two weeks in magical shopping district with money to spare and a desire to see and experience everything and anything that was denied for most of his life.

Two weeks of heaven.

The well published story of Sirius Black did not escape Harry's attention; that was a bit hard to achieve when everybody in the alley couldn't stop talking about it. Nor did the likelihood he was Black's next target evade his notice.

It didn't take Harry long to discover that only a few people actually knew what they were talking about, the rest were just regurgitating the stories and speculation from the papers. Of the people that did know, well most of them expressed a range of differing opinions, some quite the opposite of what the papers where hyping.

By the time Mr Weasley got around to telling Harry the truth, an act Harry was immensely grateful for, he was already well prepared. Spending a lifetime with people after him, one way or the other, left Harry decidedly unmoved by the knowledge that yet another person wanted to do him harm. At least this time, he had more in the way of resources to help him.

A substantial part of the third bag of gold Harry took from his vault went towards making sure he had several items not on the Hogwarts list of supplies.

“Hermione, isn’t there some spell or something you could use to stop Crookshanks from trying to eat Scabbers?”

“You mean something like a congeniality spell that is meant to help pets get along?”

“Yeah, I guess. Or something that makes him sneeze when he gets close or something.”

“I don’t know, but I can look it up. Maybe there’s a variation of the cheering charm. That’s a great idea, Harry.”

“Maybe a cheering charm on Scabbers will help him a bit too.”  
The compartment door suddenly opened and someone fell painfully over Harry’s legs.

“Sorry! D’you know what’s going on? Ouch! Sorry —”

“Hullo, Neville,” said Harry, feeling around in the dark and pulling Neville up by his cloak. “Can somebody make a light please? It’s a bit stupid to just sit here in the dark.”

The end of Hermione’s wand glowed brightly, making them all squint in the sudden brightness.

“I’m going to go and ask the driver what’s going on,” said Hermione, starting to stand up.

“No, let’s just stay here and lock the door,” said Harry. “In my experience, there are times to go look what’s going on, and there are times to curl up into a little ball and hope whatever it is passes you by without noticing you. This is definitely a time to sit tight.”

Before any of them could respond to Harry’s rather puzzling yet frightening statement, the door to the compartment opened again.

“Whoa!” said Ginny, as three wands and a compact, vicious looking crossbow suddenly pointed in her direction. “It’s just me, relax.”

“Come in and sit down, Gin,” said Ron. “We were just about to lock the door.”

“Good idea,” she answered, taking a seat next to Harry. “There something moving around out there, and it doesn’t feel good. Harry, where did you get that wicked looking crossbow?”

“Diagon Alley,” he replied. “I figured I could use a bit of extra protection this year, if you know what I mean, and Hagrid gets along all right with a big one.”

Ron slammed the door and Hermione cast a spell on just as an almost invisible, dark, shadowy figure glided passed, causing Ron and the others to yelp in fright and cram against each other, as far away as possible from the creature.

The doors rattled as whoever, or whatever, it was tried to open them. Then it stopped and appeared to take a long, rattling breath.

An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart.

Harry knew fear well. He had experienced many different types and levels of it in his life, ranging from the panic of being caught by Dudley and his gang, to the worry of what punishment the teachers would dish out for his missing homework, and even the bone-marrow-shaking fear of a five year old experiencing a massive thunderstorm all alone in the dark without even a teddy bear to hold.

This was none of those. This feeling was nothing short of ultimate terror.

He could feel his eyes start to roll back in his head and heard a distant screaming, but before it got bad enough for him to collapse, Professor Lupin was suddenly standing between them and the doors, a strange silvery light flowing from his wand and towards the creature.

The horrible feeling fled as quickly as the cloaked figure Harry could barely see moving away outside.



“Bugger me,” said Ron, succinctly summing up almost exactly what Harry and the others were feeling.

“Why aren’t you in Hogsmeade buying Stink Pellets and Belch Powder and Whizzing Worms like the rest of your nasty little friends?” said Filch.

Harry shrugged ignoring the man’s slur against his friends. “Professor Dumbledore says it’s too dangerous for me to go.”

Filch snarled for a moment, and Harry wondered what he had said to make the man angry with him, something hadn’t happened in ages. Maybe Filch had overheard him placing a resupply order with the twins?

“Probably for the best, Harry,” said the caretaker after visibly fighting down his rage. “With that menace Black lurking around, you’d be best keeping close to the castle, lad, especially if you’re on your own.”

Harry nodded and headed off, wondering why Filch spat the name Black like it was a curse.

Harry tapped the map and whispered “Mischief Managed.”

The map ignored him.

Growling, Harry tried again, saying the password louder and louder until, finally, the lines faded away and the parchment became blank.

The map was useful, but it was a right pain to use.

“Hermione, I couldn’t help notice that Ron seems to think you were in his divination class at the same time you were in Muggle studies with me,” said Harry quietly.

Hermione went very still, and then tried to brush him off.

“Don’t be silly, Harry. How could I be in two places at the same time? You boys have obviously got it wrong.”

Dudley was the worst liar Harry had ever met, until Hermione. In Dudley’s case, it was because he never had to put much effort into

his acting to get Petunia to believe him. For Hermione, it was most probably because she didn't have much practice.

"Gee, I don't know, Hermione, but maybe there's a little thing called magic involved? Now, are you going to tell me and Ron what's going, or do we have to figure it out ourselves, because you know we have nothing better to do than solve a mystery, especially when it involves our best friend," said Harry.

Hermione looked torn by indecision, and half angry. She was obviously struggling to find an acceptable answer.

"I can't, Harry. I promised not to tell anybody," she finally said. "Please don't."

Harry frowned, knowing that Ron would not be able to just let it drop, even he could. "How about you tell whoever it is you promised that we figured out something was going on, and see if they'll let you tell us. You know we'll figure it out eventually anyway."

Hermione sighed in resignation and nodded. The Sneakoscope buzzed loudly in Harry's hand, just like it did almost every other time he took it out of its special box.

"Hey, is that the Sneakoscope I sent you? It looks bigger than I remember. Didn't I tell you Bill said that thing was rubbish," said Ron. "I only bought it 'cause I figured you'd get a bit of a laugh out of it."

"This isn't the one you bought me, Ron," answered Harry, peering closely into the orb. "I thought it was a great idea and bought myself a professional grade one while I was staying in Diagon Alley. It saved me a heap when I was dealing with dodgy shop owners, but, ever since I came here, it hasn't stopped going off. Same with the one you gave me, by the way. Seems to work fine normally, and is a darn sight easier to lug around than this beast, but neither want to work here at school."

"Probably because there's so many shady characters around here," said Ron, nodding towards his twin brothers conspiring in a corner of

the common room. "So what else did you get, besides that and the neat crossbow?"

"I bought a foe-glass. It's meant to show my enemies when they get close to me," said Harry, packing away the Sneakoscope. "So far, all it has shown is Snape's big nose."

"Looks like it's working well then," said Ron, nodding in agreement. Harry looked at the newly restored portrait of the fat lady with more than a little awe. "Mr Filch, you have done an excellent job fixing the painting," he said to the caretaker. "You can't even tell it was torn!"

"Thank you, lad," said Mr Filch, standing back to look at his handy work proudly. "There's a whole range of magical aids you can use to fix just about anything. Putties and fillers that turn into the stone they are put on, tapes that merge with the original material you're patching, even glues that stick metal together like a weld - all sorts of things for when peoples can't get the spells and whatnot right. You'd be surprised at how big a market there is for products that do the job properly, without a lot of silly wand waving."

Harry nodded thoughtfully.

A huge Barn owl landed in front of Neville with the smoking red envelope of the most feared letter any Hogwarts student could receive – a Howler.

"Run for it," suggested Ron.

Harry had other ideas. Before Neville had a chance to move, Harry grabbed his almost empty bowl and upended it over the smoking letter.

"Help me," he said to the two stunned boys watching him, as he almost climbed on the table to put his weight on top of the bowl.

Ron and Neville knocked their own plates aside to clamber up next to Harry, all holding the tub down. A muffled screaming could be heard from under the bowl. It seemed to go on for ever, but finally stopped when an explosion lifted all three boys up two inches.

“Good thinking, Harry,” coughed Ron, using his hand to try and clear away some of the smoke billowing out from under the now bent out of shape breakfast bowl. “That was a nasty one.”

Neville nodded in agreement and turned to Harry. “Where did you come up with that idea? I’ve never seen anybody beat a howler before.”

Harry shrugged and started filling a replacement bowl. “My cousin used to like love a war movie, er, a story, where one of the troop would throw himself on top of a bomb to stop the others from getting killed. Of course, Dudders just like to see the guy get blown up...”

Neville looked even more shocked, but Ron just shook his head.

“Muggles,” said Harry’s red headed friend. “Mad the lot of them, I tell you, mad.”

“Even the Hogwarts ghosts avoid it,” said Ron as they leaned on the fence, looking up at the Shrieking Shack. “I asked Nearly Headless Nick...he says he’s heard a very rough crowd lives here. No one can get in. Fred and George tried, obviously, but all the entrances are sealed shut...”

“Ron, we live with ghosts, and Hagrid or Lupin shows us monsters every week, not to mention we’ve got Snape in the Dungeon,” said Harry. “What could possibly be more haunted and scary than Hogwarts?”

“Bulstrode’s undie’s draw?” suggested Ron.

Dear Mr Harry Potter

Thank you for your enquiry. We’re sorry to inform you that the Patronus Charm is not covered in any current module of the Kwickspell course.

But don’t despair!

Future revisions may include it, so be sure to keep your subscription up to date, and watch this space!

“Bugger!” swore Harry, tossing the letter aside.

“Expelliarmus!” croaked the ragged figure of Black, pointing Ron’s wand at them.

Harry’s and Hermione’s wands shot out of their hands, high in the air, and Black caught them. Then he took a step closer. His eyes were fixed on Harry.

“I thought you’d come and help,” he said hoarsely.

His voice sounded as though he had long since lost the habit of using it. “Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you not to run for a teacher. I’m grateful...it will make everything much easier-arrggh!”

“Easier?” asked Harry, taking the miniature crossbow from his pocket and loading another bolt into it. “I bet my dad never kept a second weapon in his pocket, did he? Especially not one coated in Draft of the living Death, eh?”

Black looked blankly at the small bolt sticking from his leg and then fell to his knees on the floor, wands tumbling from his hands to clatter on the ground.

“No, I’ve waited too long —” he croaked, a pleading expression on his face as he fell back to a sitting position, needing to use a hand to keep himself upright. “Please...let...me...explain...So close...”

Harry was about to put a second bolt into Black to keep him down, when the door burst open and Professor Lupin charged into the room.

“Expelliarmus!” Lupin shouted.

The crossbow flew out of Harry’s hand, and Lupin snatched it out of the air.

“Oh this just gets better and better,” said Harry, discretely reaching into his pocket for his backup – a half-brick-in-a-sock cosh.

Harry knew better than to go into a gun fight with only a knife, or into any fight with only one backup.

Hermione was frowning as she kept her wand trained on the unconscious figures of Black and Lupin. "Harry, aren't you curious to find out what they wanted to tell you, about your parents and what really happened?"

Harry paused from tying the splint on Ron's leg and thought about it. "Yeah, I suppose I am," he said. "I can't expect anybody else to tell me what they say, can I? Once I get Ron sorted out, we can tie them up, then revive one, and ask. Then we'll do the other and see if their stories match."

Hermione nodded. "Oh and Ron, I think it would be a good idea to put Scabbers in a cage, since it was his running off that started this whole mess."

Ron grimaced in pain at Harry's ministrations, but nodded, far too concerned about his own welfare to think much about his wayward pet.

The small crossbow bolt caught professor Snape in the thigh. He tripped and crashed into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, a trickle of blood oozing from under his hair. He had been knocked out, either by the potion on the bolt or by the blow against the wall.

Hermione screamed, horrified at Harry's actions.

"I am glad you decided to take our side, Harry," said Black. "Snivellus would probably have fed me to the first Dementor he came across."

"Take your side?" asked Harry. "Nah, I just wanted to shoot the git."  
"What — how — Hermione, what happened?"

"We've gone back in time," Hermione whispered, lifting the chain off Harry's neck in the darkness. "Three hours back..."

"The time turner you wouldn't let us borrow, right?" said Harry. "What are we supposed to do now? We know they managed to catch Sirius, so we can't change that..."

"Maybe Professor Dumbledore wants us to save Buckbeak?" suggested Hermione. "And then we could use him to rescue Sirius. The Headmaster told us exactly where he was been kept."

Harry stood still for a moment, thinking hard.

"Hang on a second," he said, brow furrowed in concentration. "Just how far back does that Time-turner go?"

"So let me get this straight," said Ron from his hospital bed. His leg was fully healed, but Madam Pomfrey insisted on keeping him in until morning. "You went back to the beginning of the day, and all you could think to do was write a letter to Professor Dumbledore, explaining what was going to happen and how you knew, and then save Buckbeak by nicking him before he was executed?"

"It was the only way we could make sure everything happened the way it did," explained Hermione. "It took a lot of effort to make sure everything was in place, like getting Professor Lupin his wolf's bane potion without Professor Snape knowing about it."

She was sitting the edge of Ron's bed while Harry sat slumped in a chair to the side. It had been a long day and he was almost asleep. Sirius was well away on Buckbeak while Professor Dumbledore sorted out the mess with Fudge caused by Professor Snape's lies. Peter Pettigrew was currently locked away in a cage, awaiting trial, despite Fudge's initial negative reaction at discovering the trio were telling the truth. The idiot refused to believe anybody, despite all of the evidence, and was still planning on having Black immediately kissed.

"Blimey, Harry," said Ron. "I can understand Hermione going through it all like that, making sure everything matched up perfectly, even with Lupin secretly taking his potion and Black having a wand waiting for him where they locked him away, but did you have to let my leg get busted?"

"Sorry, Ron," said Harry, rubbing his eyes wearily. "We couldn't risk changing anything that we saw happen. We already took a big enough chance with what we did do, but it was worth it, just to see the look on Snape's face when Dumbledore revealed he had

captured Peter in the forest, but Sirius had escaped. It took a lot of work making sure Sirius had a wand and a place to go hide.”

Ron sighed and nodded, having many times over the last few months been lectured by Hermione about the dangers of time travel whenever he tried to convince her to share the time-turner.

“Fair enough, but couldn’t you have at least slipped me the exams answers as study notes or something?”

Harry got off the Hogwarts express and walked smiling towards his grumbling Uncle. Sirius was still keeping out of sight, since the Ministry was dragging its feet in getting his name cleared, but Harry had not doubt he would be seeing the man again soon, even if it was only in his dog form.

“What are smiling at, boy?” snarled Vernon.

“You’ll find out soon enough, Uncle,” said Harry, earning another growl from the ridiculously oversized man.

His secret pockets were once again choc-a-bloc full of various Zonko’s products, but it was the long letter currently sitting in his trunk from his psychopathic, murdering Godfather to his guardians that made Harry smile the most.

More reviews means faster updates, as the ego beast likes to be fed, but five days between chapters is pretty damn quick as it is.



## Year four

Harry lay back in his bed as the nightmare of Voldemort and Wormtail began to fade. For most of his life he had lived a nightmare, of one sort or another. That made him fairly complacent about the kind of visions that left other people his age, or even considerably older, writhing in a cold sweat.

His scar was burning, but it was just another ache, and when you have lived with various aches and pains for most of your life, it was easy to not even notice it.

Reaching out to pat the enormous black dog asleep by his bed, he smiled and then went straight back to sleep.

Harry watched the Dursleys sit down to their meagre meal, and laughed inwardly. The rations they were on, in a vain attempt to reduce Dudley's enormous girth enough for him to fit into the school uniform, were not substantially less than what Harry ate for most of his life before Hogwarts, but he was having none of that anymore.

"Right," said Harry, interrupting the Dursley's meal. "I'm going out for a while. Enjoy your dinner. Come on Snuffles, let's go get some pizza."

The huge Grim silently padded down the stairs to follow Harry out of the back door. Behind them, Dudley moaned pitifully, Vernon cursed under his breath while turning purple with anger, and Petunia gave both Harry and Snuffles a look of pure loathing, but none of them dared say anything.

Having a famous convicted murderer for a Godfather had its advantages, especially when the Sirius wrote them a letter saying he was watching closely, had left Snuffles as a guard, and was paying for Harry's meals and lodging for the summer. It made leaving the house to dine elsewhere a common occurrence that didn't cause much fuss.

Harry's magically expanded trunk contained a whole room that was stuffed with enough food for the pair of them to last a month, but

sometimes they felt the need to get out of the stifling confines of Privet Drive.

“Or maybe a steak dinner,” he added, just loud enough for his family to hear.

Snuffles coughed the canine equivalent of a laugh as Dudley began to cry.

Harry looked around at the wizard camping ground and couldn't stop himself from laughing. The only thing he had ever seen more ridiculous than a hundred thousand wizards trying to look like Muggles, were the Dursley's trying look like a nice, normal, family. None of them had any idea what they were trying to emulate.

The tents though, they were impressive. It made him wonder how a family like the Weasleys could be running short on space when this kind of magic was available. Some of his vault was going to be invested in some wizarding camping gear that he and Sirius could use next holiday, even if it was only setting up the tent in the Dursley's backyard.

The world cup stadium too was very impressive, although the people running the show needed a good whack on the head with a Bludger bat for their laughing attempts at organisation. Imagine having to arrive two weeks beforehand if you had a cheap seat because Muggles might notice, when a magically expanded bus could secretly ferry in a few hundred people at a time from anywhere in the country.

Still, the only thing that would have made it better was if Sirius could have attended, but he was much safer staying at the Burrow, and it was only for a day or two.

Nevertheless, Harry felt distinctly vulnerable without the huge form of Snuffles present, and checked to make sure his usual arsenal was stocked and ready to go, along with a new trick or two.

Without warning, the silence was rent by a voice unlike any they had heard in the wood; and it uttered, not a panicked shout, but what sounded like a spell.

"MORSMORDRE!"

Nothing appeared to happen for a moment or two, then there was the sound of somebody cursing loudly and rather viciously from the woods behind them. An odd squeaking noise, a lot like the rubber chickens Fred and George used in their fake wand manufacture, punctuated the violent swearing.

"I think somebody just discovered one of the twin's inventions," giggled Ron.

Harry laughed too, know his wand, the most precious and prized of all his possession, was safely tucked away in an inner pocket. It wasn't until much later that he noticed his own fake one, presented in a grand ceremony by Fred and George at the Burrow, was missing from his back pocket.

"I'm never wearing them," said Ron stubbornly. "Never."

"Fine," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "Go naked. And, Harry, make sure you get a picture of him. Goodness knows I could do with a laugh."

"Why is everything I own rubbish?" said Ron furiously, striding across the room to unstick Pigwidgeon's beak.

"Ron," said Harry, digging into this trunk. "Have a look at these."

"What's that? Muggle clothes?" asked Ron, eyeing the huge, greying jumper Harry held out for him.

"That's the best piece of clothing I own, outside of my Hogwarts robes and the Christmas presents your mum makes every year," admitted Harry, feeling a bit embarrassed, but just angry enough to keep going. "You might think your hand me downs are second rate, but I bet you never had to wear anything as bad as this, did you?"

"But that's different, Harry," whined Ron. "You can go out and buy new stuff anytime you want. I bet you don't have some munky old dress robes with frilly bits in your trunk, do you? I'm stuck with what I'm given."

"Mate, are you a wizard or what? If you don't like them, change them. Hell, I saw Charlie downstairs darning his fire-proof balaclava - hasn't your mum show you how to sew? I've had to patch up Dudley's old things a time or two, so I know my way around the pointy end of a needle a bit, you must know something."

Ron mumbled something unintelligible and flopped down on his bed.

"Look, here's what we'll do. If we can't fix them up on our own, we'll ask around and see if somebody can help. There's bound to be somebody who can help make them into something a bit less, er--"

"Flouncy?" suggested Ron, unable to keep the smile from his face.

"Yeah, that's it, flouncy. Otherwise I'll loan you the money to hire some robes, because there is no way I am going to go to anything where you are going to show up starkers, no matter how much of a laugh it'll give your mum," laughed Harry.

Ron's pillow collected him right in the face.  
"Imperio!"

It was the most wonderful feeling. Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped gently away, leaving nothing but a vague, untraceable happiness.

The experience was so foreign to Harry that his subconscious automatically started looking for the catch. Immediately the empty, echoing feeling in his head disappeared, and he found himself standing in exactly the same spot he was moments ago when Professor Moody cast the curse.

"Now, that's more like it!" growled Moody excitedly.  
Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out -"Harry Potter."

Harry stood up, the buzz of angry bees filling the hall. He calmly made the immensely long walked to the front of the school, and then whirled around to face the students. His mask, the legendary unflappable, stoic, rock of indifference when it came to other people's

opinions of him, finally cracked and, to the astonishment of every person present, shattered into a thousand pieces.

“When I find out which one of you twits put my name in,” he yelled in rage. “I am going to take my crossbow, and jam it up your --”

“MR POTTER!” yelled Professor McGonagall, drowning out the yelling boy.

“And if it was you, Fred and George Weasley,” Harry continued, ignoring his head of house’s interruption. “I am going to make you beg for the tender mercies of your mother when she finds out what you have done!”

Then he whirled back around and angrily marched toward the door the real champions went through, determined to get it all over and done with as quickly as possible.

Behind him, the hallway erupted with the noise of a small riot. Almost nobody noticed that, during the-boy-who-lived’s unprecedented rant, his hair and robes moved slightly, as if in a gentle breeze, and those that did notice, kept it to themselves.

“So tell me, Harry, it’s all right to call you Harry isn’t it?” asked Rita Skeeter. “Do your friends call you, Harry, or is it too hard to make friends because of your disability?”

Harry opened his mouth to reply but didn’t get a chance before she was firing her next question.

“Is that why you did it? Did you enter the tournament to prove that having no magical power doesn’t make you less of a man?” asked Rita.

“Wait, what?” he said.

“Or did you do it to prove something to your parents?” she continued.

“Eh? My Parents? What have they got to do about anything?” Harry was quickly starting to get very annoyed with the reporter. “What’s that quill writing? Hey, I do not have tears in my eyes!”

“And how do you think your parents would feel about your meagre abilities if they were her to see you now?”

“Right, that’s it!”

The explosion of Dungbombs was so severe it shredded Rita’s quill and made it impossible for anybody to be in the same room as her or Harry for quite some time.

Harry was not sorry to miss out on the photo-shoot. Harry picked up one of the Support Diggory badges and looked at it. He pressed the red writing and watched as it changed into the green “Potter is a Squib!” message.

“Cool,” he laughed.

Then he pinned the badge to his robes and walked away grinning. He knew better than to give his enemies any kind of satisfaction. The crowd’s roar nearly deafened Harry as he stepped out into the bright sunlight. At the other end of the stadium, the huge Horntail thrashed its wickedly spiked tail menacingly. The pointed ends gouged deep furrows in the stone floor, as small wafts of smoke escaped from the beast’s nostrils.

“This had better work,” mumbled Harry to himself.

Striding up to a large boulder confidently, Harry raised his wand and brought it down to cast the most important spell he had ever attempted.

The rock shimmered and melted, slowly transforming into a cow. The beast mooed quietly, and then turned to begin taking hesitant steps towards the Dragon eyeing it hungrily from the other end.

A murmur of appreciation at the apparent transfiguration swept through the crowd as their shouts died down in anticipation of what was going to happen. The cow got to within a few short yards of the Dragon before its massive snout opened and poured a torrent of flame over the unfortunate beast.

The crowd went wild as the cow exploded, flinging entrails in all directions.

Immediately, the Horntail snatched up the remaining piece of its victim and swallowed it in one mighty gulp.

“Well that went well,” said Harry, moving to the next rock.

Over a dozen very messy and crowd-pleasing deaths later, a gore covered Harry confidently walked past the snoozing Dragon and picked up the golden egg unmolested.

“Harry! That was wicked!” screeched Ron, running towards the tent entrance where Harry waited for them.

Hermione looked like she was going to envelop him in a hug, but then pulled back at the last second as she realised he was still pulling bits of meat out of his hair.

“My goodness, Harry,” she said, restraining herself while he continued wiping blood from his face. “That was positively the best bit of magic I have ever seen you do. How did you become so good at transfiguration?”

“I didn’t,” answered Harry, once he felt confident that opening his mouth wouldn’t result in a foul taste as stuff fell into it. “All I did was a Finite Incantatem.”

Ron and Hermione stared at him blankly, so he felt compelled to explain.

“I paid a couple of guys to sneak into the stadium last night with a load of animals coated in sleeping potion. They transfigured them into rocks and put a compulsion on them to walk into the Dragon’s mouth,” he said. “All I had to do was cancel the transfiguration and wait until the Dragon was full, something I didn’t think would take three cows, four sheep, an antelope, and five goats, to accomplish mind you. I only had a few ducks left as a last resort before it would have been all over.”

"You, you cheated!" accused a shocked Hermione.

"Wicked," added Ron with a huge grin.

"Excuse me, Cho," said Harry hesitantly. "Er, is there any chance that you might be interested in going to the Yule ball with me?"

"No," she answered quickly, a little too quickly. "Er, I mean, I can't because I already agreed to go with somebody else. Sorry."

Then she smiled almost nervously.

Harry gave a weak smile in return and watched as she hurried away down the hallway, not sparing him a single glance.

She probably did have somebody else to go with, after all, she was quite pretty, and very popular, but Harry couldn't help feel his chances would have been much better, if not for his meagre magical power level.

No Kwickspell course could ever bridge the enormous gap between him and most other wizards, and no shy, meekly requested invitation was going to get him a date.

It was time to be a Gryffindor.

"Parvati? Will you go to the ball with me?"

Parvati went into a fit of giggles. Harry waited for them to subside, his fingers crossed in the pocket of his robes.

"Yes, all right then," she said finally, blushing furiously.

"Thanks," said Harry, in relief. "There's just one thing, I can't dance, oh, and I need to find somebody to go with Ron. I don't think he can dance either."

Parvati frowned and Lavender grimaced.

"Well..." said Parvati slowly, "I suppose my sister might...Padma, you know...in Ravenclaw. I'll ask her if you like, but what are you going to



do about learning how to dance, because neither of us is going to go unless you are going to dance.”

“Er, well. Any chance of you teaching us?”

Pavarti gave Lavendar an exasperated look before turning back to Harry. “All right, I’ll try and teach you, and Padma can teach Ronald.”

Harry smiled broadly, causing the dark skinned girl to blush for some reason. Then another potential problem occurred to him.

“Ah, there’s just one other thing that you might be able to help us with. Ron’s got the ugliest dress robes I have ever seen. They’ve, well, they got lace, lots of it, and it’s really horrible, and Ron said he’d rather show up naked than wearing it.”

Pavarti groaned and Lavendar burst out laughing.

“I’ve got it!” said Harry, excitedly thumping the book in front of him.

“You’ve found a spell that lets you stay under water for an hour?” asked Hermione, not quite as enthusiastically as Harry. In fact, she sounded slightly suspicious. “You’re not even looking in the right section.”

Harry looked at her blankly, blinking several times as his overwrought mind caught up. Ron snored loudly from the other end of the table, completely undisturbed by their conversation.

“Er, no. I gave up on that idea hours ago. I told you that I can’t swim, didn’t I? Anyway, this is what I need. Now I just need to practice, and spent some time down by the lake,” he said, holding out the book for the bushy-haired girl to see.

“Hurrumph,” said Hermione, but she reached out to take the volume anyway.

Harry heard the final, quavering note from the bagpipe with relief. The Weird Sisters stopped playing, applause filled the hall once more, and Harry let go of Parvati at once.

"Let's sit down, shall we?"

"Oh - but - this is a really good one!" Parvati said as the Weird Sisters struck up a new song, which was much faster.

Harry considered insisting on sitting this, and all future songs, out, but then thought about how the girl was doing him a favour by agreeing to be his date, and by getting her sister to go with Ron. She deserved to have the chance to parade him around like a pet at a dog show, at least for a little while longer.

Besides, what did he care if he looked a bit silly trying to dance? It wasn't like the other students ever had a favourable opinion about him anyway, and he was used to his school mates always pointing and snickering about him, even before Hogwarts.

"Okay," he said, "if you don't mind dancing with a clumsy Quintaped like me, that is."

"Oh, you're not that bad," giggled Pavarti. "You just have to relax and try to have some fun."

So Harry did try to relax, and surprisingly, he had quite a bit of fun. Harry casually walked down to the podium where the other three contestants were already standing in their swimsuits. One look at the shivering students made Harry very happy about having no intention of entering the freezing water, although his eyes boggled at Fleur's obvious discomfort, as were almost every other male's in the crowd.

"Mr Potter," said Bagman, sounding very worried. "The contest is about to begin, are you ready? Do you need more time perhaps?"

Harry yawned and stretched luxuriously, much to the dismay of the overweight official and to the apparent amusement of Professor Dumbledore.

"Sorry," Harry said, stifling another yawn. "I just slept in a bit. Don't wait for me though, go ahead. I'm all set."

The canon fired and the three other champions leapt into the water, Fleur and Cedric both immediately performing the Bubble-head

charm while Krum transformed himself into a sort of half-shark. It was all very impressive.

Harry calmly walked over to the edge of the pier and knelt down. He then lent forward and stuck his head into the water. Several bubbles rose to the surface around his face, as if he was trying to speak under water.

"That's it, Potter, you Squib," yelled Malfoy loudly. "Just go ahead and drown yourself and do us all a favour!"

The catcalls and laughter of the crowd stopped a few second later when the heads of a dozen or so Mermen rose to the surface and began a strange conversation.

The spectacle of Harry speaking to the Merepeople in short bursts of conversation, punctuated with the quick responses and bursts of what could only be described as laughter, from the lake dwellers, went on for several minutes more, before a group of them finally broke off and dived back into the water. They returned five minutes later carrying the unconscious body of Ron Weasley.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr Potter?" demanded the Drumstang Headmaster, as Harry dragged Ron onto the podium. "You are meant to retrieve the hostage yourself. This is not permitted. You are cheating!"

"Not at all, sir," said Harry. "The rules say I cannot get help from any other witch or wizard, and I have to deal with any creatures I encounter as part of the task on my own."

"You cannot zimply ask ze Merepeople to 'and over your 'ostage!" shouted an enraged Madam Maxine, her voice booming out over the noisy spectators.

"No ma'am," Harry agreed. "You can't, but I could, and did, bargain with them to trade for Ron."

The uproar continued until well after the last hostage was returned and the points were awarded.

“Mr Potter,” called the Headmaster. “May I have a moment of your time, please?”

Harry sighed and motioned for Ron and Hermione to continue on without him. Was it really too much to expect to be allowed to answer the challenges of this ridiculous tournament without everybody telling him he was cheating all the time?

“Look, Professor,” said Harry rather defensively. “I never wanted to be in this stupid contest to begin with, so don’t try to make me feel bad about not competing the way everybody thinks I should be. I’m doing the best I can with what I have, all right?”

“Harry,” said the Headmaster, his voice slightly less jovial than it normally was. “I was simply going to congratulate you on learning several rather long sentences of Meremish in such a short space of time. It is a note-worthy achievement, although your accent is rather atrocious.”

Harry gulped. “You speak it?” he asked weakly. “You heard what I said to them?”

“Indeed,” said the Headmaster, once again sounding quite amused. “In my youth, I was fortunate enough to have a competent teacher and a need to spend some time in a lake, but I am curious to know how you arrived at your agreement.”

Harry suddenly felt incredible embarrassed at being caught out, and at his earlier attitude.

“Well,” he stumbled. “All this month, I spent hours at the lake trying to bargain with them. Luckily, a few understand some English, but even with that, Hermione’s help, and a translation book, it was slow going. I was ready to give up because it seemed like I had nothing that they wanted, but then I found out they like a good joke.”

“Yes,” agreed the Headmaster, nodding thoughtfully. “I do recall they had a rather simple sense of humour, but really, Harry, knock-knock jokes?”

“Well, they don’t have doors you see...”

Harry approached the first obstacle of the maze with trepidation. So far, his journey was incredibly light on obstacles, almost as if somebody was clearing the way in front of him.

The glowing golden mist looked harmless, but the boy-who-lived knew, better than anybody, how misleading something seemingly innocent could be.

Digging deep into his pocket, he retrieved a small white dove and tossed it into the cloud, stepping back quickly to see if it exploded or suffered some other horrible demise.

The bird took to its wings, and then flipped upside down before darting down to crash into the ground. Obviously confused, the poor creature appeared to try to stand on its head while taking flight. Harry watched, feeling just as confused as the bird. Eventually its struggles took it to the other side of the mist, and it fell out, battered but apparently no worse for wear as it took flight and left the maze.

Shrugging, Harry stepped into the mist; confident that he could overcome whatever disorientation it created.

The sight of the Dementor rising up in front of him nearly caused Harry to panic. He had never managed to produce more than a weak glow using the Patronus charm, but luckily, he made sure to stash a full collection of Weasley pranks into his hidden pockets.

Collecting his wits, Harry tossed a random handful of small sweets at the gaping mouth of the creature. His aim was true, and at least one fell into its horrid maw.

Suddenly the thing stopped moving, and began coughing. The soul-wrenching fear dissipated, as the coughing became a gasping, and scaly hands rose to claw at its mouth, as if trying to prise something out.

Harry raced passed what he now doubted was anything more than a Boggart, slowing only to pick up one of the lollies that missed.

"A Super Gob-stopper," he laughed. "Wonder if it would work on the real things?"

"Sorry, could you repeat that again?" asked Harry, not for the first time.

"Perhaps if you tried to maintain eye contact, my words would remain in your memory slightly longer," suggested the Sphinx.

Harry blushed.

"I'm sorry," he spluttered, trying unsuccessfully to keep his eyes above the neckline of the creature. "It's just that, well, you are quite attractive."

"I would take that as more of a compliment if you were able to keep your eyes off my more generous human-like proportions when you said it," replied the Sphinx, sounding more amused than annoyed.

"Look, I can't help it, all right," admitted Harry with exasperation. "I'm a fourteen year old boy who has never even had a girlfriend, and you are an incredibly good looking lady-"

"Sphinx," corrected the creature, still not sounding angry, or even perturbed by Harry's indiscretion.

"-whatever, you still look damn fine. Now how am I supposed to concentrate on a stupid riddle when all I can think of is, well, you know, those," said Harry, nodding towards the creature's chest. "Couldn't you have at least worn a shirt or something?"

"Clothes?" said the slightly startled Sphinx. "I have never been offered clothes before."

"Here," said Harry, digging around inside of his voluminous pockets to produce one of Dudley's oversized t-shirts. "Try this on. It's not really your colour, but I'm sure it'll look all right."

Harry never had much in the way of clothing, but, over the years, he had been pushed into puddles and hit with enough muck and dirt by Dudley that he almost always carried some spares with him, if he was

able. It was an outdated habit, but one that served him well at the oddest of times.

He handed the top to the smiling creature and waited until she had her head completely inside the unfamiliar clothing before sprinting passed as fast as he could.

Behind him, he could hear her puzzled calling, but there was no way he was going back to tell her how cute she looked, no way in hell.

"We'll both take it," suggested Cedric, nodding towards the cup. "After all, if you hadn't used that rocket to scare off the spider, or sconed Krum with that half-brick-in-a-sock, I wouldn't be here anyway."

Harry shook his head. He wanted to, that was for sure, but he felt a bit bad about getting through the tournament the way he had.

"Cedric, this competition is meant to prove who is the best Wizard. I might be a good magician, but I am not much of a wizard. You take it, you deserve it more."

"Okay, Harry," said Cedric, then he suddenly grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him forward to touch the cup at the same time.

The wrenching of the Portkey was almost as shocking as Cedric's unexpected actions.

"I thought you were in jail," spat Harry, fighting the pain in his scar as well as the bite of Peter Pettigrew's knife cutting his arm.

Wormtail ignored him and turned his back, obviously confident the magical ropes binding the boy were secure enough. Harry's wand and crossbow were safely tucked away inside one of the rat's pockets.

He didn't know Dudley tied Harry up more times than either boy could remember, or that the lump of lard never returned to release his cousin, meaning Harry was quite practiced at getting loose.

Magical robes were quite a bit harder to get out of though, and it took Harry substantially longer to get free. He was just in time to see the cauldron change colour as Wormtail added his own severed limb to the foul mix.

The last thing the sobbing man saw was Harry's favourite sock-filled-with-a-half-brick coming straight for his face.

Leaving the crumpled form on the ground, Harry took one look at the bubbling cauldron and knew this was a brew he didn't want to complete successfully.

Years of sharing a class with Neville Longbottom and the Slytherins gave the boy-who-lived a fine appreciation for all of the different ways to kill a potion. The suspected nature of this one called for total desecration.

The handful of various Zonko and Weasley products splashed into the pot just as Harry threw himself to the ground, covering his head with his arms protectively.

The explosion lit up the night sky and sent the residents of Little Haggleton into an ecstasy of rumour mongering that lasted for years afterwards.

"So Fudge is being an moron, the twins have a bag of gold to develop their shop, Hagrid is off with his huge girl-friend to find some bigger friends, Sirius is staying with you at Privet Drive again over summer, and you-know-who has probably come back, since it looks like Pettigrew got away again," said Ron counting off each point on his fingers. "I dunno, Harry. Seems to me you've a bit of a slow year, mate. What are you going to next year to make up for it?"

"Stay home," grumbled Harry.

Thanks for the feedback, and the help of the guys at AFC, especially IP82. Year five is suffering some serious lack of plot issues, just like canon, and so will take a bit longer, also just like canon. Please don't wait for the end before leaving feedback - it really does inspire me.



This took longer to write, is much bigger than the previous ones, and I don't think is as good - funny how that matches canon, isn't it:)

Once again, thanks to the guys at Alpha Fight Club for their input.  
Rule no. 1 - You don't talk about Alpha Fight Club.

Year Five

Harry grumbled as he needlessly checked the mailbox again on his way to the park. Professor Dumbledore's information blackout held all of three days before Harry decided to use Muggle post and telephone to communicate with his friends, knowing arrogant wizards like the purebloods or the Ministry would be too ignorant to even think of intercepting it.

Hermione immediately agreed, knowing the futility of trying to stop Harry once he got something in his head. He knew she felt it would be better to try and control him through some form of appeasement, rather than following the Headmaster's rather strict instructions of keeping him completely isolated. This meant she was secretly acting as a go-between for Harry and the others.

So far, she had sent him very little in the way of real news, but he read enough of the Prophet to get a clear picture, despite the Ministry's censorship. The lengthy discussions and arguments the two adolescents had about the meanings and ramification of Fudge's stupidity barely sufficed, but it was better than the alternative.

Sirius was busy trying to get his ancestral home into order so that Harry could move there. This left the boy woefully alone.

At least the Dursleys were behaving themselves again. Aside from endlessly complaining about Harry's obsession with the news, Vernon was content to ignore his nephew's presence. Petunia was highly suspicious of Harry's absence from the meal table, especially when he rarely left the house, but refrained from ordering Harry to do chores, and only scowled sourly at the sight of him.

Unfortunately, Dudley, in his typical small brained idiocy, took the absence of Harry's enormous hound to mean he was fair-game again. The obese lad learned the error of his ways after a particularly nasty

incident involving a water pistol loaded with Stinksap. It took three days for him to wash the smell off, even with Petunia scrubbing him red raw using hospital grade disinfectants.

Boredom and frustration left Harry feeling rather belligerent, so he decided a trip to the places Dudley and his gang hung out was in order.

They were surrounded by total, impenetrable, silent darkness, as though some giant hand had dropped a thick, icy mantle over the entire alleyway, blinding them. Dudley's terrified voice broke in Harry's ear.

"W-what are you d-doing? St-stop it!"

"I'm not doing anything," croaked Harry, "but I am about to - Close your eyes."

The magical flare roared to life in Harry's hand, dispelling the unnatural darkness with a fierce, burning light. In the glare, Harry made out the dim, almost spectral outline of two cloaked figures closing in on them; one at either end of the alley.

## Dementors

The bright light gave them pause, but they quickly overcame their hesitation and started gliding towards the boys again.

"W-what's going on?" demanded Dudley.

"Dudders, I'm only going to tell you this once, and then you are on your own. RUN FOR IT."

Not waiting to see if his cousin followed his advice, Harry bolted for the end of the alley closest to the safety of his home. The Dementor reached out its scaly hands to catch him as he ran past, but a surprise elbow to the hooded head caught it off guard and it moved aside, right into Dudley's path.

Dudley screamed as the invisible body crashed into him and reacted instinctively, smashing his meaty fists into the creature with a powerful one-two combination that left the monster reeling.

The two boys pounded the pavement like the hounds of hell were chasing them, as indeed they were.

“Good one, Duds,” complimented Harry breathlessly as they slammed the door shut behind them. “You really slapped it.”

Dudley looked at Harry with a strange expression on his face. “Don’t ever come anywhere near me ever again,” he said. “Ever.”

Harry laughed until Petunia came running into the hallway, a letter bearing the unmistakable seal of the Ministry of Magic clutched in her waving hands.

“I’m not flying all the way to London,” said Harry. “I’ll fall off or crash before we get a dozen miles. Didn’t anybody tell you lot I’m almost a Squib?”

Murmurs of disbelief filled the room at his announcement, and Harry sighed. No matter how many times he proved it, nobody wanted to believe he was only slightly more magically powerful than Hermione’s cat, Crookshanks. The bouts of temporary blindness suffered by the wizarding world rivalled the Dursley’s at their worst sometimes.

“But, you won the Triwizard Tournament,” objected Tonks. “You can’t be useless, and you’ve got a Firebolt broom...”

“What makes you think not having much magic means I’m useless?” asked Harry a little heatedly. “And Sirius bought me that broom before he realised I can barely get a normal one to lift off the ground. Now, what’s plan ‘B’?”

There was a nervous shuffling as everybody looked at one another.

“Moody?” asked Harry. “Don’t tell me you don’t have a plan ‘B’...”

“Aye, lad, I do, but it involves sacrificing one of us for a distraction so the others can get away,” grumbled the old ex-Auror.

Harry sighed. "Professor Lupin? Surely you thought about this before showing up here?"

"Sorry, Harry," Remus said, scratching his head. "I didn't really catch the plan beforehand, and, er, forgot you don't fly well."

Far, far above them, a shower of bright red sparks had flared among the stars.

"That's the first signal," said Arthur, pointing to the stars. "Somebody had better come up with an idea soon."

"Leave it to me," called Harry, heading back into the house. "I've got an idea."

-

"Tonks can you please stop wriggling?" said Harry, painfully aware the girl on his lap did not have much room to manoeuvre in.

It seemed like such a good idea when she first suggested sitting there, but now, some indeterminate time later, it was becoming quite uncomfortable, for many reasons.

"Hey, this was your idea," she snapped. "Tell Kingslley to get his elbow out of my face and I might be able to get settled. Damn you are bony, kid. Don't you ever eat?"

Harry pressed his face against the window, hoping the coolness of the glass would take the heat from his face.

"Confundus!" cast an annoyed Moody, hitting the poor Muggle driver again.

So far, they had to do it about every thirty minutes, or the man would start to realise he had ten people in a taxi meant for four.

"I say, Arthur," said Emmeline. "Where did you learn expanding the inside of Muggle cars?"

“Er, hmm,” stuttered Arthur.

“How much longer is this going to take?” asked Elphias. “My leg’s gone to sleep again.”

“So has Lupin,” grumbled Sturgis, nodding towards werewolf sleeping with his head lolling on Hestia’s shoulder.

“Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness! Half-breeds, mutants, freaks, begone from this place! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers –“

“Er, has anybody tried getting rid of this?” yelled Harry over the screeching.

“I’ve been trying to get her down for a month. We think she put a Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of the canvas,” answered Sirius.

“Well then,” said Harry, a mischievous smile creeping into his face. “What about paint remover? Mr Filch showed me some really good ones he uses at Hogwarts...”

A matching smile quickly lit up Sirius’s face.

“There is no way I am facing a room full of doxies and whatnot, armed with just a spray bottle full of poison,” said Harry defiantly.

“Now, now, dear,” said Mrs Weasley. “You know you can’t do magic outside of school, and I don’t think any of your, er, toys, will do much good against an infestation this bad.”

“Mrs Weasley, have you ever heard of a Flea bomb?”

Smoke curled out from under the closed door of the drawing room. On the other side, Harry and the others could hear a lot of rattling and banging as the Doxies and other unwanted pests unsuccessfully fought the magically souped-up Muggle pest exterminating device.

“Right, now we leave it alone for a day, and then go back in tomorrow to pick up the bodies,” said Harry happily. He knew he had saved

them hours of pointless and potentially dangerous labour. "We just have to make sure nobody opens the door too early, okay?"

"I'll make sure Kreacher doesn't do it on purpose," said Sirius. "Kreacher! Kreacher! Come here you useless toe-rag. I wonder where he's gone – he normally hangs around trying to sneak off with anything he can get his filthy mittens on."

A particularly loud thump sounded inside the toxic room.

"Ooops?" said Harry meekly.

"Harry," said Hermione said quietly. "You're a bit upset at Ron being selected a prefect, instead of you I mean, aren't you?"

Harry sat on the bed and examined his feelings. Self-delusion was a fine thing, but reality was more Harry's game.

"Yeah," he admitted. "I am a bit. It's silly, and I know it, but I guess I was kind of hoping, you know? Despite being almost a squib, but I guess that didn't help me any."

Hermione nodded, "I think everybody must hope for something grand sometimes-"

"But I know better," interrupted Harry, a slight hint of anger and frustration in his voice. "I lived my whole life knowing that my dreams won't come true. It shouldn't bother me, not after all of the things I've been through, but it does."

"It's only natural," said Hermione. "To feel disappointed."

"Not for me, not normally. I think going to Hogwarts has changed me. Made me weaker or something," said Harry.

"No, Harry," she said moving closer. "It's given you hope. Hope that you will have a better life, hope that things are changing for the better."

Harry laughed bitterly.

“Interrogators: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Court Scribe, Percy Ignatius Weasley.”

Fudge coughed to clear his throat before continuing. He extracted a piece of parchment from the pile before him, took a deep breath, and read out, “The charges against the accused are as follows:

“That Harry James Potter did knowingly, deliberately and in full awareness of the illegality of his actions, produce a magical effect in a Muggle-inhabited area, in the presence of a Muggle, on the second of August at twenty-three minutes past nine, which constitutes an offence under Paragraph C of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, and also under Section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy.

“You are Harry James Potter, of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?’ Fudge asked, glaring at Harry.

“Yes, I am,” Harry said, resigned to the fact nobody was going to be defending him and he was, once again, completely on his own.

“You were previously made fully aware that you are not permitted to use magic outside school while you are under the age of seventeen prior to the date of the incident in question?”

“Yes, I was,” said Harry, his mind racing to figure out how to derail the proceedings.

Somehow, a handful of Dungbombs just wasn’t going to cut it with this crowd. Luckily, he worked a basic defence with Sirius, a man who had dedicated his youth to outthinking and disrupting authority. It was risky, but he had no choices left.

“And yet you knowingly performed magic, and did so, fully aware that you were in close proximity to a Muggle at the time?”

Many times Harry watched helplessly as Dudley lied and bluffed his way out of trouble, while Harry tried valiantly to stick to the truth and

his innocence. Long ago, he decided to distance himself from his hated family by refusing to be like them, but reality overcame his will time and time again, forcing him to take the less noble path to protect himself.

Deny everything; that was Dudley's motto. Learned from the bosom of his father, and reinforced by years of successful use. Harry learned his lessons too.

"No," he said confidently. "I did not."

A murmur rustled through the crowd, growing louder and forcing the Minister to raise his voice.

"Therefore-" Fudge started saying, before stopping abruptly. There was a startled pause as the Minister suddenly realised what Harry said. "Mr Potter, I have the report of the incident right here in front of me, we know it was you."

It was time to be a Gryffindor. He was not going to win them over, so he had to attack. The underage detectors only record that magic happened near him, not that he specifically caused it. Dudley's presence had to be pure conjecture, or was based on interviews with the Dursleys. Neither could counter his claim of innocence, and the flimsy nature of the evidence against him worked in his favour.

If worse came to worse, Harry would happily let them snap the rubber chicken wand in his back pocket.

"Prove it," said Harry, resisting the urge to smirk.

After all, it wasn't like there weren't other countries, or other schools. "I knew it!" yelled Ron, punching the air. "You always get away with stuff!"

"They were bound to clear you," said Hermione, who had looked positively faint with anxiety when Harry had entered the kitchen and was now holding a shaking hand over her eyes, "there was no case against you, none at all."



"I didn't get off scot-free you know," said Harry, feeling a bit embarrassed.

The sudden silence was almost deafening, as the twins and Ginny stopped dancing and Mrs Weasley spun to face him.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, I had to pay a fine," said Harry. "It was only twenty galleons, but now they have something else to exaggerate in the paper."

Ron's face went white at the mention of the amount, and Harry suddenly wished he hadn't mentioned the fine.

"But, Harry," said Hermione. "Mr Weasley said you aren't expelled and they didn't snap your wand..."

"Oh they dropped those charges, the underage magic and Statute of Secrecy violations," said Harry.

"I don't understand. What did they fine you for?"

"Contempt of court," Harry answered with mock sadness.

Sirius's barking laughter from the doorway was worth much more than twenty galleons to Harry.

"So, Potter," drawled Draco Malfoy. "I hope you didn't think a Squib like you was going to be a prefect, did you? I mean Weasley's not much better, but at least he is a wizard."

"Nah," said Harry. "I kind of figured if it meant spending two minutes extra with you, I'd rather not have it."

"You're Harry Potter," said the blonde girl Ginny called Looney Lovegood.

Her voice held a dreamy quality, and her expression was curiously vacant, as she stared unblinkingly into his eyes.

"I know I am," said Harry.

During his life with the Dursleys, Harry was often portrayed as mad, or dangerous, or dangerously mad, but the girl reading the upside down magazine was something else again. She seemed quite dotty, and her small but highly unusual mannerisms were all designed to reinforce that impression.

Designed, that was the key.

“Looney eh? How that working out for you?” Harry asked pointedly.

Luna tilted her head to the side and stared unblinkingly for a moment, and then a seemingly spontaneous smile bloomed on her face.

“Could be better,” she answered, the surprised smile making her expression suddenly appear much less vacant.

Harry smiled back.

“Oh, you won't need ink,” said Professor Umbridge, with the merest suggestion of a laugh in her voice.

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: I must not tell lies. A thin line of red ink appeared and he felt a slight tingle in his hand, but both disappeared quickly. Shrugging, Harry continued to pretend to write.

He knew something was not going the way Professor Umbridge expected when she stormed over and snatched the quill out of his hand.

“What have you done?” she demanded.

“Exactly what you wanted,” said Harry, baffled at her sudden anger. “I started writing without any ink, just like you said to!”

Fury burned in her eyes, but at what, Harry didn't know.

“Get out,” she said.

Harry grabbed his bag and ran for the door; glad to escape whatever it was the mad woman had planned for him, but he decided that, next time, he was going to nick that black Quill.

“Okay, new plan,” said Harry, taking a deck of cards from his bag and standing up. All around him the class stared in shock.

Immediately Umbridge practically sprinted over to him. “What do you think you are doing, Mr Potter?” she demanded.

“Ignoring you for a start,” he said. “Hey Ron, want a game of cards?”

“That’s ten points from Gryffindor and detention again, Mr Potter. Now sit down and be quiet before I give you the rest of the month as well.”

Harry laughed.

“Since you fairly well buggered the whole points system, there’s nothing left for you to take, you stupid cow. As for detention, you can stick that up your jumper too. I’m not going to bother to show up and there’s sweet bugger all you can do about it. You know, I didn’t even mind your so called classes, since it meant I had a chance to do at least as well as everybody else for a change, but I am not going to put with you banging on about Voldemort – don’t cringe – not really being back. So just nick off and leave us alone, will you?”

Umbridge was almost incoherent with rage.

“SIT DOWN!” she screamed.

“Sod off, fatso,” said Harry dismissively.

“Pack your bag and leave right now, Mr Potter - You may consider yourself expelled,” said Umbridge, sounding inordinately pleased.

All around them the other students gasped.

“Bugger off,” said Harry nonchalantly, as he climbed up to sit on the desk. “I’ve decided I’m not going to bother with you anymore. Now go

find a kitten to strangle, or whatever it is you do for fun when there aren't any students around. Ron? Game or what?"

The stunned expression on Umbridge's face said it all.

If there was one thing in school Dudley Dursley excelled at, it was driving substitute teachers up the wall. His refusal to acknowledge their authority stripped them of their ability to control the class. Half of the time, the poor substitutes were too embarrassed to get another teacher to intervene, but if they tried, the class would settle just long enough for the second teacher to leave, and then it would start up again. None of them ever seemed to realise it was only the obedience of the children that gave them any leverage in the first place.

If Umbridge tried to hex him, it would be all out war, proving she was incapable of controlling the students. All Harry needed was for a few others to follow his lead, and Umbridge would be quickly rendered even more ineffectual than Professor Binns.

"Yeah, okay," said Ron, tossing his useless text book aside. "But I'm not using your deck, it never works properly."

"That's because they're Muggle cards, you clown," laughed Harry loudly. "Now cut them before Dumbitch here has a coronary or does something stupid, like bringing Aurors into the school because she can't control a class of untrained children."

"Hey, Harry," called Dean Thomas, another Muggleborn student who had suffered Umbridge's prejudice. "Deal me in will you?"

Around them, chaos slowly ensued.

"Mr Filch, did you know Professor Umbridge hates Squibs even more than she hates students?"

"What's that, Potter?"

"Professor Umbridge. She said she'd rather die by you-know-who's hand than listen to a Squib like me."

“She did, did she? Well we’ll just have to see how well she gets along without my help then, won’t we?”

“Thanks, Mr Flich. You’re the best.”

“Hermione, Do you think you think you can cast a spell that causes people reading a letter to be cursed with something really visible and hard to get rid of?” asked Harry.

Hermione concentrated for a few seconds before answering. “Possibly. Why? What are you thinking?”

“I am thinking that if somebody really is reading our mail, we should give them something to read. I could just jam the envelope full of Botuberpus, but that lacks a certain elegance.”

“But what happens if it’s not intercepted and the person you send it to reads it?” asked Hermione. “And it’s not going to help get anything out secretly, if they are being stopped.”

“That won’t be a problem,” answered Harry. “You see, I am going to Owl it to myself. I’ll just tell one of the school owls to bring it to me via a long flight. As for getting letters out, I’ve got something Sirius gave me to contact him with, and everybody else can send letters from Hogsmeade.”

Hermione nodded, looking thoughtful. “It’s only going to work once or twice, though,” she said. “What we really need is for a whole lot of people to do it at the same time, with lots of different traps.”

Several days later, much of the Slytherin table failed to show up for classes. No excuse was given.

“The fact is, Harry, that you have the most precise wand movements and the best pronunciation of anybody in the school aside from the professors,” said Hermione.

“That’s because I have to, Hermione,” said Harry. “It’s not like I’m happy that I have to cast ever spell perfectly for it to work half decently when Ron can wave his stick around like a baboon and get more of an effect.”

Harry's ongoing participation in the Kwickspell course was not common knowledge, but his two friends knew all about it, of course.

"Hey!" objected Ron, then he thought about it for a bit. "Well actually, I suppose you're right there."

"That's exactly my point," said Hermione. "You can help all of us with the practical parts of spell casting. We can all read the theory and learn what we are meant to do from previous year's text books, but we need to practice, and you are actually one of the best practical casters in the castle. We'll never pass our OWLs if we don't do something."

"All of you?" said Harry warily. "What do you mean all of you?"  
Dear Percy,

Thank you for your timely warning and wise advice. I fully intend on taking your counsel in this matter. Your letter confirms my belief that you are the right person to seek advice and assistance from in matter I am currently facing.

Madam Umbridge has appointed a select group of Slytherins students into positions with authority above that of the head boy. The current head boy has been reduced to a mere student, with no responsibilities above his normal academic ones at all, and he is now answerable to Inquisitorial squad members years his junior. This has destroyed any aspirations or hopes I had for the esteemed badge you once wore.

Indeed, with the new policy that all OWL defence spells may not be practiced before the practical portion of the OWL examination, she has effectively removed the possibility of government employment from most of the student population including myself, since I had hoped to become an Auror.

The Educational decree that allows her to replace existing professors with her own staff means this same practice will spread to all other subjects before I graduate. Only a chosen few will be able to get a decent grade, and thus have any hope of one day entering the Ministry.

Were it not for the fact she was appointed by Ministry Fudge himself, I would swear she is seeking to build a secret army with the intent of undermining Minister Fudge and one day seizing power for herself.

I am hoping you are able to help myself and a few others find a way to gain Ministry employment without the current requisite DADA grade, as Madam Umbridge is outright refusing to teach anybody except the Slytherin students how to pass the practical DADA exam.

Your grateful brother, Ron.

"That doesn't sound anything like me," said Ron, reading the letter. "It sounds like Percy."

"That's the idea," said Hermione. "He is going to think you are trying to be like him."

"Gah," said Ron. "What's the point of this anyway? He is not going to believe it."

"It's like this, Ron," explained Harry. "If somebody starts a rumour, the best way to counter it, is with another rumour. By sending this to Percy, he'll most likely tell somebody else, probably to make you sound stupid-"

"Oh, thanks," interrupted Ron.

"Then that person will tell somebody else, as a sort of a joke. Before you know it, some people are starting to think it might be serious, or that there is no smoke without fire. I've seen it a hundred times, trust me. Sooner than you can imagine, other people will be watching Umbridge very closely, probably trying to stop her getting an advantage over them somehow."

Neither Ron nor Hermione had to ask where he had seen it happen before.

"You do realise that you don't own the House-elves, and so you can't free them, right?" Harry asked Hermione in exasperation.

Initially, he agreed with her principle, and even found her crusade cute, especially when it got her off his back about studying. Now it was just annoying.

Ron buried his head in the book, apparently hoping to avoid the inevitable explosion.

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, and then closed it. A frown creased her brow. More seconds passed as she fought an internal battle of some sort. Ron peeked over the top of his book just as she replied.

“At least I am trying to do something!” she snapped. “I’m not just sitting around taking advantage of the poor creatures.”

“Hey!” Harry replied sharply, his rare temper once again gaining showing its ugly head. “Hands up everybody here who has helped free an abused House-elf.”

Her death glare, as he raised his hand high in the air and wiggled his fingers, did nothing to remove the nasty grin from his face. Ron’s muffled snort of laughter didn’t help either.

“So that gives you the right to live in luxury off of their slave labour?” she snarled, packing up her bag and storming off.

Harry felt his temper rising higher, as it had more and more often lately, but he fought down the impulse to yell at her retreating back.

Hermione knew a fair bit about Harry’s life before Hogwarts. She and Ron had both learned how close to a house-elf’s life he had led before Hagrid rescued him. The last thing he would ever consciously do is be unappreciative of the shy creatures whose efforts helped make his life so comfortable, but it didn’t mean he was going to blindly fight every injustice he came across.

“You are so going to pay for that, you know?” said Ron.



“Maybe,” said Harry. “But if it means she stops hiding those silly hats around the place and Dobby can get other elves to help him clean up, it is worth it.”

“You’re just as barmy as the rest of them,” said Ron.

Harry stood at the threshold of the door to the room of requirement and gave out a long, slow whistle.

“Whoa,” said Ron, looking over Harry’s shoulder.

“Er, Harry,” said Hermione. “This doesn’t look like a place where we can practice for our DADA exam.”

The huge room resembled a World War Two command and control centre Harry had once seen on one of Dudley’s favourite war movies. A massive long table filled the centre of the cavernous room, and one whole wall sported an enormous Marauder’s map, moving dots and all.

Dozens of workstations lined one wall, and a crammed bookshelf reaching up to the distant ceiling covered the other. Several closed doors were interspersed along the length of both walls, possibly leading off to other rooms whose purpose Harry could only guess at.

“I suppose I was a bit too general in my need,” said Harry. “A safe place to use to get around Umbridge and her stupid rules’, was a bit broad I guess, wasn’t it?”

“I dunno, mate,” said Ron, watching Hermione almost sprint to the bookshelf. “I think it might be perfect, just not exactly for what we were thinking.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully, a grin suddenly blooming on his face.

“Wonder what we’d get if we asked for a place to have a bit of fun?”

“Legilimens!” said Snape, attacking before Harry had a chance to even think about preparing himself.

Image after image was racing through his mind, vivid and clear. Dudley and his new toys - Marge’s dogs - Hermione in the hospital

wing. More and more played out in a virtual cavalcade of Harry's miserable life.

Suddenly the images stopped.

"That was pathetic," spat Snape. "I felt no resistance at all."

"Did you see everything I saw?" Harry asked, feeling a bit dizzy from the surprise attack.

"Flashes of it," said Snape, his lip curling in a sneer. "You are not trying, you are making no effort. You are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!"

"So what?" asked Harry. "What does it matter what you see? How is that a weapon?"

"You ignorant fool, Potter," Snape almost yelled. "You are meant to be trying to stop me from accessing your memories. Do you want all of your secrets exposed to the Dark Lord? He will use your fears and twist them to make you give him what he wants!"

Harry laughed, to the dismay of his surly Professor. Humiliation and fear were the Dursley's stock in trade; their primary weapon. Barely a day of his earlier life went by without one or more of them trying to use his hopes and fears against him, trying to crush his spirit and force him into submission. Indifference was Harry's defence. He learned not to let it get to him, refusing to be manipulated through his emotions.

"Why don't you try finding out something I don't want you to know?" he asked. "Then I might have a chance of stopping you."

"Legilimens!" screamed Snape without warning.

The raw power of the spell nearly knocked Harry from his chair. More images flashed in front of his eyes – Lying on soiled sheets in his cupboard, dreading the moment Petunia would unlock the door and find his accident - falling face down in the mud after being pushed by

one of Dudley's gang - Cho walking in front of him down the hallway, her hips swinging in a natural, seductive rhythm.

Snape broke off his attack again.

"Why did you stop there?" asked Harry impudently. His head was throbbing with pain, but he wasn't going to let Snape know that. "That was a good part - I was enjoying that bit. Go back and let me watch the rest of it."

Resistance and indifference wasn't always the best way to deal with bullies. Sometimes, you had to encourage and egg them on, robbing them of the pleasure they would normally get from subjecting you to their will. Snape found a new way to inflict torment, but Harry doubted the man could handle a drastic change in tactics.

"Get out," snapped Snape, rubbing his temples.

"Aren't you meant to be teaching me something?" asked Harry, forcing himself to keep from bolting for the door or smiling in triumph.

"I cannot teach what you refuse to learn," snapped Snape.

"Well since you haven't told me what to do, and haven't been able to see anything I don't want you to, I guess that means I've learned everything you can teach me."

"You arrogant brat," Snape growled, rubbing his temples. "Just. Get. Out!"

Harry smiled and headed for the door, hoping he wasn't weaving too much as he walked. With luck, he would be able to find some books to help him learn what he was meant to do, but at least, for now, he had won, and Snape wouldn't be bothering him.

"Well, Potter, this meeting is to talk over any career ideas you might have, and to help you decide which subjects you should continue into the sixth and seventh years," said Professor McGonagall. "Have you had any further thoughts, since we last met two years ago, about what you would like to do after Hogwarts?"

"Er-" said Harry, suddenly smiling. "Well, I thought of, maybe, being a High Inquisitor. Do you happen to know what the qualifications are for that position?"

A startled grunt sounded from the corner where Umbridge was sitting. Professor McGonagall sat quietly, apparently thinking over Harry's statement. Her mouth twitched slightly as she fought to keep away a smile.

"I am afraid I am not familiar with the exact requirements," she said, somehow keeping her voice exactly the same as it was before. "Perhaps we could ask Madam Umbridge?"

"So, Madam Umbridge," asked Harry jauntily. "Can you tell me the official requirements of being a High Inquisitor?"

The toad-like woman was almost foaming at the mouth. "I can assure you that you will never have what it takes," she hissed.

"That's hardly official," said Harry, frowning in mock worry. "Did you need anything in the way of grades? A specialist course or test to make sure you had what it took maybe? Is there a pamphlet about the department? Or maybe you could just tell me the NEWT level's needed to be one of the Minister's elite?"

Umbridge opened her mouth to reply, but Professor McGonagall interrupted.

"I do not believe there are actually any NEWT level courses needed at all," she said. "The position of High Inquisitor was created by appointment from the Minister himself, and I highly doubt he would need somebody capable of any serious level of spell casting for the job. It is, after all, purely an administrative function."

Umbridge was spluttering with indignation, but Harry just ignored her and continued talking to Professor McGonagall.

"So basically I can just do whatever courses I want, and so long as I suck up to the Minister and agree to be his toady, I'm in?"

"That would appear to be the case, however I cannot in good conscious recommend it as a career choice, since it is very likely the position will not exist in the near future."

"Oh dear," said Harry, shaking his head in obviously fake concern. "I guess I'll just stick to what we discussed before then, although I reckon with my fame and people's desire to read all about me, I can count on becoming an author, or maybe even a journalist, if all else fails."

"After all, it's not like I haven't already sold one very popular and widely read story."

Umbridge was almost choking, completely unable to articulate her outrage, but they both continued to ignore her.

"Very good, Mr Potter," said Professor McGonagall, smiling. "Very good indeed."

The dream was coming every night now. Vague recollections of Sirius being trapped in the strange room full of glowing Orbs were stringing together into a more coherent whole. It wasn't like when he had his powerful vision of Nagini, it was closer to a normal dream, but it repetition meant something.

The primary school had once asked for a therapist to analyse Harry, in a bid to reduce his supposed 'aberrant' behaviour. Weeks of telling the truth led to the therapist concluding Harry was an accomplished and compulsive liar, but Harry did get something valuable out of the sessions.

Repeating dreams should not be ignored – they often contained truths his waking mind refused to acknowledge.

Harry's failure to pay attention to the vague dreams last year taught him to take things like that more seriously. After saving Mr Weasley's life earlier in the year, Harry was more than willing to consider dreams of long corridors as meaningful, even if he still wouldn't share them.

The therapist had seen to that.

Harry looked up at Grawp, who was now pulling back the pine with an expression of detached pleasure on his boulderish face; the roots were creaking as he ripped them away from the ground.

"Well, I reckon tha's enough fer one day," said Hagrid. "We'll -er - we'll go back now, shall we?"

Harry and Hermione nodded silently, then started following Hagrid back to his cabin, the problem of Grawp in the forefront of Harry's thoughts.

"Hermione, I know giants are resistant to spells, but could we combine-cast a shrinking spell to make him, er, a bit more manageable?" he asked. "Maybe down to about Hagrid's size, or smaller, if possible?"

"Blimey 'Arry," boomed Hagrid. "That's a thought!"

Hermione looked hopeful for a second, but then shook her head sadly. "We're not powerful enough, sorry."

"What about a potion then?" asked Harry hopefully. "I'm sure we'd be able to make something strong enough that'll work."

Her answer wasn't very reassuring, but it was a start. "Maybe," she said. "I'll need to look into it a bit further."

"I suggest you do, Hermy. I suggest you do."

"This is it," said Harry, holding up his prize so Umbridge could see it in the faint light filtering through the trees of the forbidden forest. "This is the weapon Professor Dumbledore had us working on."

Umbridge looked at him sceptically. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "That is a sock filled with sand."

"Special sand," said Hermione quickly. "It has taken us months to develop, and can only be collected from this exact spot, on this specific night, when the conjunctions of Saturn's moons and the constellation Perseus is just right."

“And the sock is special too,” added Harry, seeing Umbridge wasn’t buying it. “Surely you have heard about Dumbledore’s funny obsession with socks, how it’s all he ever asks for at Christmas? Didn’t you ever wonder why?”

It was like a light suddenly appeared in Umbridge’s eyes, as if she had just experienced an epiphany. “Yes, yes,” she said excitedly. “I was told about that – now it all makes sense.”

“With this, Dumbledore can move the world,” said Harry, lifting the sock higher so that it caught the moonlight.

Umbridge watched with naked hunger in her eyes, as the sock suddenly descended and collected her in the side of the head.

She collapsed unceremoniously, unconscious before she hit the ground. Harry followed up with another whack, just to make sure.

“You do know the saying is actually ‘Give me a lever and I’ll move the world,’ don’t you?” asked Hermione.

“Didn’t have a lever,” said Harry, emptying his sock out. “No lever, no crossbow, no Dungbombs, nothing, except a make-shift sock-cosh. Did the trick though.”

“What should we do with her now?’ asked Hermione after retrieving the fat woman’s stumpy wand.

“Leave her for the Centaurs or spiders to find,” said Harry, putting his sock back on. “I don’t really care. Let’s go get the others and some of my stuff. We’ve got work to do.”

Harry watched the room spin again, the blue lights blurring into one continuous streak. After exhausting all other possibilities, they had flown the Thestrals to London thinking Sirius was captive in the strange department, only to discover it was a trap.

“To me, Potter,” repeated the drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy as he held out his hand, palm up, waiting for the Ord containing the prophecy.

His reaction was pure reflex. The stinking cloud of smoke that erupted between the two groups, as a handful of Dungbombs, smoke grenades, and various other obnoxious devices from Harry's bag of tricks exploded, was thick enough to obscure any sight.

"Run!" shouted Harry, grabbing a handful of Hermione's robes and pulling her along as he pushed the others.

"Stupefy!" shouted somebody behind them through the coughing.

"NO!" shouted Malfoy at the same time. "DO NOT ATTACK! WE NEED THE PROPHECY!"

A red beam of light shot past them and crashed into the shelves, smashing a glowing orb and releasing its message. The brief glimpse of the ghostly fortune teller gave Harry an idea.

"Hit the shelves," he yelled to the others. "Knock them down around them."

Almost immediately flashes of light flew from the wands of his friends as they ran. All around the shelves started falling as the spells smashed them. Lines of prophecies fell like small waterfalls, releasing more light and noise and adding to the confusion his Dungbombs had created. The Death Eaters were sure to be close behind, but were obviously hampered by Malfoy's instructions. Harry dug into his deeper pockets.

"Shields!" he yelled, trying to grab his friends and pull them together. "Cover us from the prophecies. If they land on you, you could be affected like Bode."

Five magical shields enveloped the group as Harry finally retrieved his largest rocket.

After the spiders and the Basilisk in his second year, and with the memory of his close encounter with the Dementors on his mind, Harry collaborated with the twins to build a new type of rocket, the likes of which had never been seen before.



“When this goes off, duck and cover, just like in training” said Harry.

A red light flew smashed into one of the shields, knocking Neville to the ground.

“They’re over here!” shrieked a Death Eater, appearing from an alley between the shelves in front of them. Neville’s return shot was wide of the mark, but caused the masked man to duck back behind the shelves.

Harry thumbed the trigger on the foot long rocket.

“Down!” he yelled throwing himself to the floor and covering his ears.

Immediately his friends followed his example.

With a mighty roar, Harry’s rocket leaped a few feet of the ground, and then erupted in a sunburst of light. The heat alone scorched the top of Harry’s head, but the flash left spots in his eyes despite having them squeezed closed and facing downwards at the floor.

The shelves nearby simply vanished, obliterated by the initial magical explosion. A volcano of fire spewed from the tope of the bright sphere of light, pouring out above them before twisting and flying in every direction. The fire bent and twisted, becoming every fireworks effect ever seen, mundane or magical.

Burning effigies of giant men and dragons rode through the shelves as if they didn’t exist, barely slowing down as they played out dramas meant for spectators to enjoy from much further away. Fiery Phoenixes burst into startled flight, souring up to the roof before returning to sweep what should have been an excited crowd hundreds of feet below, but was mainly six adolescents huddled on the floor a mere dozen feet below.

Whole isles of prophecies exploded, toppling the tall shelves in a cascade of light and fire. Harry caught glimpses of the chaos as his ultimate rocket ran its course. For a brief moment he spied one Death Eater, robes burning fiercely, try to vanish a huge spinning pinwheel heading towards him. Instead of disappearing, the pinwheel doubled

in size, colliding with the unlucky fellow before he could get out of the way.

After what seemed like an eternity, the noise and light started to drop off

“Move,” Harry said, grabbing Ginny to get her attention. He could barely hear his own voice, but his intentions were clear. The six sprinted for the door, still standing ajar in front of them.

Just before Harry went through, he spared a glance at the room they were leaving. Not a shelf remained intact. Fires burnt everywhere he looked, but no pile of debris was larger than about five feet tall. A pile of debris moved slightly, probably indicating at least one Death Eater was still going.

They still had to find their way out, and there were probably more Death Eaters in the building, but at least they had escaped the trap, for now.

“I really hope I don’t have to pay for this,” he muttered, before slamming the door and letting Hermione seal it.

Harry ducked as another flash of green light narrowly missed him. He didn’t know where the others were; the confusion of the massive brawl happening around him making it nearly impossible to keep track of anything.

Death Eaters and the Order were engaged all around him in a furious battle. The timely arrival of Sirius and the others spared him having to watch Bellatrix torture Neville to death or give her the prophecy.

‘Come on, you can do better than that!’ he heard Sirius yelling.

Harry turned to watch as a jet of red light hit Sirius squarely in the chest.

The laughter had not quite died from his face as he started to fall backwards towards the curtain. Harry’s wand was still in his hand, already pointing towards Sirius.

“Accio Sirius!” he screamed.

Sirius seemed to pause, a slight smile still on his face as he looked at Harry, but then Harry’s weak spell failed, and Sirius’s body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backwards through the ragged veil hanging from the arch, disappearing into a black nothingness.

“Potter, you cannot win against me!” Bellatrix cried.

He could hear her moving to the right, trying to get a clear shot of him. He backed around the statue away from her, crouching behind the centaur's legs, his head level with the House-elf's.

“I was and am the Dark Lord's most loyal servant. I learned the Dark Arts from him, and I know spells of such power that you, pathetic little Squib, can never hope to compete.”

Harry knew no spell of his would be powerful enough to down the evil witch, his feeble attacks so far proved that, but he couldn’t let her escape, not after all she had done. The crossbow was long since gone, his supply of bombs and fireworks all used. All he had left was his wand, the Prophecy, and the clothes he was wearing.

Quietly, he edged right around to where the goblin stood beaming up at the now headless wizard, and carefully snuck up behind Bellatrix. With a mighty heave, Harry swung the globe-filled sock and smashed it into the witch’s head using all of his strength. It connected with a solid thump and smashed spectacularly. The glowing apparition began speaking, but it was muffled by the sock and the sound of the broken waterfall. Harry wasn’t paying attention anyway, focussed as he was on the downed witch.

“I don’t compete, bitch,” spat Harry, ignoring the pain suddenly pounding violently in his scar. He levelled a kick at the semiconscious woman’s head. “I just win.”

Bellatrix slumped over unconscious and Harry’s head almost exploded in pain as a cold, high pitched voice spoke his name while a vile smell assaulted his nose.

“Hello again, Harry Potter”, said Voldemort.

"I feel I owe you another explanation, Harry," said Dumbledore hesitantly, ignoring the smashed remains of his possessions, some of which were still puffing smoke. "You may, perhaps, have wondered why I never chose you as a prefect? I must confess... that I rather thought... you had enough responsibility to be going on with."

Harry looked up at him and saw a tear trickling down Dumbledore's face into his long silver beard. The uncharacteristic anger that had been bothering him all year and had just caused him to ruin much of the Headmaster's office, roared to the surface again, fighting his normally excellent control to get out.

"Let me get this straight," said Harry coldly. "You let the man responsible for giving Voldemort a powerful reason to exterminate my family, torment and insult me, my parents, and my friends, for five years, and you're concerned if I'm wondering about how come I don't have a shiny Prefect badge to call my own?"

"Exactly what have the twins been lacing those sweets with Headmaster, because you can't be brewing with all the required ingredients if that is what you really thinking."

"Harry, I have explained-"

"What the hell kind of an explanation was that? You leave me to live in a cupboard and work like a house-elf for my own protection? What did I need protection from if not people who starve and abuse me and wished I was dead? Did it ever occur to you that they might be reason why I my wand is barely more useful than a sharp stick, or did you think their efforts to 'beat all that nonsense out of me' was somehow going to make me stronger?"

"Merlin's crystal balls, Headmaster. You say you were worried I might come to Hogwarts as spoiled brat, and yet you and your not-quite-reformed Death Eater sidekick don't even attempt to reign in Malfoy, the king of the 'pampered princes' as you put it, even when he does everything he can to make my life here as bad as it is at my so-called home."

“You think I give a Nifflers’ arse about the stupid badge? I would have given both my armpits to have just had friends when I was growing up, and now you’re apologising for not making me a prefect, when you obviously think I deserve it?”

“I just watched Sirius die because I didn’t have enough power to save him when I had the chance, and now you are trying to tell me I have a power that can destroy Voldemort? What kind of dementia are you living with, because unless snake-face is mortally allergic to Dungbombs or particularly vulnerable to small crossbow bolts covered in the Draught of Living Death, I’ve got nothing more powerful than spit.

“Hell, you’ve known for over a dozen years I’d have to fight him, and the only action you’ve taken to prepare me is to not give me the extra responsibility of a position that I have actually earned?”

“You are damn lucky I don’t have anything left in my pockets Headmaster, because I can guarantee you, you’d be spending the next year working from alternative accommodations if I did.

“As for being his equal, the only thing I can imagine where I could possibly be considered equal is in how stupidly you’ve dealt with both of us!

“Now open the door, I’m out of here.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a hand finding your things?” Harry asked again.

Luna shook her head but kept smiling vaguely. “No, it will all come back. It always does. I’ll just go have some pudding.”

“Listen,” he said, feeling the need to help in some way after she had made an effort to make him feel better. “If they do this every year, why don’t you fill your trunk with crud you don’t care about and hide the things you want to keep? Or better yet, come see me at the start of term and we’ll put some surprises in there that will discourage anybody touching your stuff ever again, maybe some booby trapped stink bombs or something, all right?”

The blonde girl looked genuinely surprised at Harry's offer, but her smile grew and lost its customary vacancy.

"That sounds like fun," she said.

"It does, doesn't it?" agreed Harry, starting to smile, happy to have a way to help. "And if that doesn't work, we'll shift to something more painful or embarrassing, okay?"

"Thank you, Harry. That makes me feel much better."

"Glad to return the favour, Luna. Glad to return the favour."

"Well, there is one thing good I can say about Sirius's death," Harry thought to himself sadly, as the Hogwarts express made its long journey back to London.

His friends were all waiting for him in a compartment further down from the toilets; none the worse for wear after their ordeal at the Ministry. Nobody was talking about what happened, or what it meant for them all now that Voldemort's return was verified.

Harry knew he would have to tell at least Ron and Hermione the prophecy, but it didn't take a genius to know they wouldn't thank him for burdening them with that information just before the summer holidays.

Sometimes, the urge to give in to his grief was almost overwhelming, but a life time of sadness and injustice often gave him almost superhuman emotional control.

Harry packed a few more handfuls of special Dungbombs into the pockets of the three slug-like monsters stuffed into the luggage rack. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle stupidly tried to hex him in front of the D.A., and their current less-than-human appearance was the direct result.

The bombs were modified to explode on a timer set for within five minutes of the train arriving at Kings Cross, if it ran on schedule. It might cause some inconvenience to any students who had not gotten

off by then, but it was a small price to pay to add even more humiliation to the gits and their families.

“At least he died laughing,” Harry mumbled to himself as he wiped his hands clean on Malfoy's robes. “I just can't imagine him wanting it any other way.”

With that thought, Harry walked back to his friends, his spirits considerably lighter than just moments before.

Warning: Year six will be a while in the making. Please PM suggestions or corrections instead of leaving them in reviews, but leave reviews since they inspire me.

A/N

Kreacher is not dead.

Assume events not described here leading to the scenes I have written happened with differences based on my changes. I am not re-writng the whole book people - use your imagination or just take a leap of faith and accept it. This is an AU universe and a bit of a parody story. It's not meant to cover every plot hole in canon or this AU.

Christmas, New years, and lack of inspiration caused delays, but here at last is year six. Thanks again to AFC and all the comments left by people here. I appreciate you taking the time to leave me feedback.

## Year Six

The weak ringing of the mostly repaired alarm clock was enough to rouse Harry from his habitually light slumber. It was ten minutes to eleven o'clock, and Professor Dumbledore was due to arrive soon.

The smallest bedroom of number four Privet drive once again appeared as empty as it did whenever Harry arrived each summer. Everything remotely magical, or anything that even indicated Harry lived there in fact, was packed away in his magical trunk.

Not that it was a whole lot to begin with.

Professor Dumbledore's letter indicated he would be picking Harry up at eleven, so Harry made sure he was ready, despite having some serious doubts about the headmaster's arrival so early into the holidays.

Still, Harry's life had taught him to hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Being packed and awake, should the professor follow through on his promise of early retrieval, was hardly a chore, and despite his misgivings at seeing the headmaster again, every second less spent in the oppressive house, the better.

Harry just hoped Dumbledore didn't want to spend a whole lot of time talking, not after their last confrontation, but he was half expecting it, of course

That's how things usually worked out for him.  
"Kreacher, shut up!"

It looked for a moment as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, his eyes bulging. After a few seconds of frantic gulping, he threw himself face forward



onto the carpet (Aunt Petunia whimpered) and beat the floor with his grimy hands and feet, giving himself over to a violent, but entirely silent, tantrum.

"Well, that simplifies matters," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "It means that Sirius knew what he was doing. You are the rightful owner of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and of Kreacher."

"Do I — do I have to keep him with me?" Harry asked, aghast, as Kreacher thrashed around at his feet.

"Not if you don't want to," said Dumbledore. "If I might make a suggestion, you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchen there. In that way, the other house-elves could keep an eye on him."

Harry sat silently for a few moments, thinking about the filth covered elf, and his lack of respect for Sirius.

"Nope, that's not going to cut it," he said. "Kreacher, behave yourself and stop that tantrum, right now."

The surly elf stopped thrashing and climbed sullenly to its feet. Hatred gleamed in its eyes as it glared at its new master. Harry was undaunted of course, having spent much of his life with people constantly looking at him like that; people currently seated in the room, in fact.

"I need to keep you somewhere safe and secure, somewhere that none of Voldemort's people will be able to get to you, and where you won't be able to pick up any information to pass on, so Hogwarts and Headquarters are out. Luckily, there is one other place where Voldemort's reach can't extend."

"You should be smiling, Kreacher, because you have a new family to serve, for a while, at least. You will have to work hard to get along, but I am sure you are a perfect match for them. You can even have your own cupboard to live in that I can personally vouch for. Isn't that great?"

The meaning of Harry's words and evil grin sank in, and Petunia took the only appropriate action she could.

She fainted.

"When we heard Dumbledore was collecting you in person, we thought he might be telling you something or showing you something to do with the prophecy," said Ron eagerly. "And we were kind of right, weren't we? He wouldn't be giving you lessons if he thought you were a goner, wouldn't waste his time... he must think you've got a chance!"

"That's true," said Hermione. "I wonder what he'll teach you? Really advanced defensive magic, probably... powerful countercurses... anti-jinxes..."

Her voice faded off as she suddenly realised what she was saying.

"Somehow, Hermione, I doubt very much if that is his plan," laughed Harry.

Harry opened his envelope with unexpected trepidation. Never before had his grades ever mattered to him, except that it usually meant another round of the Dursley's crying 'foul' when Dudley invariably got worse ones. This time it was different though, this time he had actually tried, although not nearly as much as he probably should have.

Harry James Potter has achieved:

Astronomy O

Care of Magical Creatures E

Charms A

Defence Against the Dark Arts E

Muggle Studies O

Herbology E

History of Magic E

Potions E

Transfiguration A

They were good, better than good in fact; they were great. While it was disappointing to see proof that his lack of magical ability prevented him from reaching the highest scores in two of the wand based subjects, he had not failed a single subject, and gained top marks in Astronomy and Muggle studies.

Best yet, he had received an E in Defence, something almost everybody had considered impossible, given his inability to make the most advanced spells work well.

It was, without a doubt, the best results he had ever received from any school, and went a long way towards making him feel validated - It was proof magical strength wasn't everything.

Now he just had to convince Hermione that her sole non-O result, the E in Defence, wasn't the end of the world for the witch.

Harry eagerly entered the Twin's shop, even though he had been in constant communication with them, and knew most of their products inside and out.

"Here we are," said Fred, as George joined them. "Shield Hats, Shield Gloves, Shield Cloaks, Shield Boots, and any other piece of clothing we can get at a decent price, including some rather impressive sets of knickers, bloomers, and various other underthings."

"Though we don't want to know if you choose to wear those particular items," said George.

"Just like we told you," finished Fred. "Won't do much for the unforgivables, but they'll stop or seriously weaken anything up to a moderate curse."

“Brilliant,” said Harry picking up a brightly coloured hat. “I’ll take a few complete sets for me, Ron, and Hermione, a half a dozen spare sets to share around, and two of everything else you have in the store. Also I insist on paying at least cost,” said Harry, knowing they would not let him pay full retail.

“What are you going to do if we don’t let you?” smirked George. “Return the goods?”

“No, I’ll not give you my suggested product list,” said Harry, holding up a notebook. “Two weeks locked in a room without much else to think about except my Marauder father and Godfather – I’m pretty sure you can imagine how many ideas I came up with for your ‘special’ product lines.”

The twins’ eyes lit up, and Harry knew he had won this argument. Harry, darted after Zabini. Though he was as close as he could get without touching him, he was not quick enough to slip into the compartment when Zabini opened the door. For a second he considered ripping the door open and stepping inside, but common sense prevailed and he let the boy close the door unhindered.

Barely a second later, a flesh-coloured extendable ear slipped under its edge. Harry took up a position outside, grateful that nobody was likely to try walking past him this close to the castle.

It wasn’t as good as being inside the compartment as he had first intended, especially since the ears didn’t work very well for him, but he was considerably less likely to be detected this way, and that made it worthwhile.

He could only imagine what a disaster getting caught inside the compartment would have been.

"Anyway, I'll see yeh tomorrow, firs' lesson's straight after lunch. Come early an' yeh can say hello ter Buck — I mean, Witherwings!" said Hagrid, starting to turn away.

“Actually, Hagrid,” called Harry. “I’m not taking care of magical creatures this year.”

Hagrid looked shocked, and a bit hurt. "Why not?"

"Hagrid, I'm never going to go into a profession where it's needed," he said. "This year is going to be hard enough without taking extra subjects. You know, with the war and all."

Hagrid still looked sad, but not angry.

"And what about you two?" he asked, looking at Ron and Hermione.

Their embarrassed looks told Harry that they had not signed up either.

"Really, Hagrid," said Harry, quickly stepping into the awkward silence. "It's not that we didn't enjoy your classes or anything, it's just that none of us wants to work with animals like you do."

Harry knew intimately what it felt like to be abandoned by people he thought were his friends. Before Hogwarts, Dudley had chased off every single person Harry had ever made even the slightest head-roads into befriending. There was no way he was going to let Hagrid feel that way.

"Honestly. Hagrid," he said. "It's nothing personal, and we'll still come and visit, if you'll have us?"

Ron and Hermione hastily made affirming sounds. Hagrid looked thoughtful for a few moments, but then beamed an enormous smile at the trio.

"Course yeh can," he said. "Don't matter to me if yeh're not taking me class, just as long as yeh don't forget yeh old friends."

"Never, Hagrid. Never in a million years."

"Pathetic, Weasley," said Snape, after a while. "Here -- let me show you--"

He turned his wand on Harry so fast that Harry reacted instinctively; all thought of nonverbal spells forgotten, he kicked out, connecting solidly with the surly professor's crutch.

The silent spell smashed into the floor next to Harry, barely missing Blaise Zabini who let out a girlish shriek, and Snape doubled over. Harry's reflex, Dudley-style follow up punch caught the unprepared man in the temple, spinning him half way around.

Snape's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed in a heap.

Total silence enfolded the room as everybody stared at the downed man and his victorious opponent standing over him, fists still clenched and chest heaving.

"I reckon you might have just gained a bit of detention there, Harry," said Dean Thomas, overcoming the shock first.

"Why?" laughed Ron, earning a scathing glare from Hermione. "After all, I didn't hear him cast a spell, so it was a totally silent defence, just like Snape told us to!"

"We have a little over an hour left to us, which should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death," said Professor Slughorn. "I know it is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!"

Harry successfully brewed this potion before, to coat his crossbow bolts once his pre-made, bought supply ran out, but it always took him much longer than an hour. While the professor said it would be the best attempt that won, Harry knew Hermione was likely to come very close to finishing it – she was simply that good.

A short time later, he gave up trying to read or remember the original instructions and followed the scribbled directions of the battered potions book's previous owner instead.

After all, with Hermione sure to deny the prize to Malfoy, what did he have to lose?

"Look, Hermione," said Harry irritably snatching back his potions book after her spell failed to reveal anything unusual about it. "It's like Ron

said, I am taking a chance following somebody else's notes, but I've been doing that ever since you started helping with our homework, haven't I?"

"That's entirely different and you know it," dismissed Hermione.

"No it's not, and you know it," said Harry. "If it makes you feel any better, I'll let you copy from it, and you can figure out why the changes work, but don't expect me to stop using every advantage I can get."

"Or me," agreed Ron. "I need the help just to pass!"

"Harry," said Ginny. "If it's just a text book, that's okay, but if it starts doing anything unusual, like writing back to you, I got dibs on seeing how well it can survive getting stuck through the middle with a dirty great fang, all right?"

Harry grinned. "Deal," he said, then turned to Hermione and waved the book slowly and tantalisingly in the air between them. "Well? Can you resist the temptation of knowing a better way to do things?"

The war between conflicting desire's going on in the girl's head was evident on her face, but Harry already thought he knew which would win.

"Okay," she said, with a huge sigh. "But I am not going to use any shortcuts in class unless I completely understand them."

"Fine by me," said Harry.

Harry left the headmaster's office in a mixed state of mind.

On one hand, he really appreciated Dumbledore sharing Voldemort's history. There was no doubt the lessons were all planned out with a specific line of reasoning in mind, and the important information was better arrived at piecemeal, rather than just dumping the lot on him.

On the other hand, he really wished the lessons included something a bit more practical in the art of surviving a fight with the powerful, evil

wizard. The headmaster, obviously concerned by Harry's lack of magical power, was trying to help in the way he thought best.

Being almost a squib made Harry acutely aware that Magic wasn't the solution to every problem, and growing up with the Dursley's gave him a slightly more cynical point of view about exactly how valuable a weapon Love was.

Harry sighed and patted the pocket with his improved crossbow in it. As usual, he was going to have to take some matters into his own hands.

"Harry, that's three of my little suppers you've missed now!" said Slughorn, poking him genially in the chest. "It won't do, m'boy, I'm determined to have you! Miss Granger loves them, don't you?"

"Yes," said Hermione helplessly, "they're really —"

"So why don't you come along, Harry?" demanded Slughorn

Harry sighed. It was probably only the second time in his life that he found himself in the position of trying to dissuade somebody from being friendly to him. Dudley made sure Harry gained very little experience in that area. With a flash of insight, inspired by his thoughts of Dudley, Harry saw a way out.

"Professor, I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, but I think I need to be straight with you; you deserve that at least," said Harry. "I have been purposely avoiding you, outside of class."

"Why?" asked Slughorn, slightly angrily.

"Sir," said Harry seriously. "I am sure many people would be very interested to know that we are more than just passing acquaintances."

Professor Slughorn's face changed from the slightly angry expression he had at the start of Harry's explanation, to a confused one, then to realisation, until finally settling on fear.



“Oh,” he said. “Oh, yes, of course. Very well then, er goodbye,” he said, turning and almost sprinting away.

“That was rather mean,” said Hermione. “They’re really not that bad. They’re even quite fun sometimes, and I doubt the Death Eaters would care much about a teacher like Slughorn being friends with you.”

“Don’t care,” said Harry. “I just wish I’d thought of telling him that sooner.”

The Snargaluff plant looked completely innocent, as if it had not just attacked the trio as they stole one of the pods from inside of it. All three of them had bruises and scratches from its vigorous defence, but now only a few stray tentacles waved gently, as if in a slight breeze.

“I’m not doing that again,” thought Harry.

While Ron and Hermione continued talking about Slughorn’s Christmas party, Harry dug around inside his book bag to find his charms notebook.

Unfortunately, Professor Slughorn’s reputation seemed to require that Harry attend the function, and there was very little chance of him getting out of it, but, at the moment, Harry was more interested in figuring out a way to complete their work without sustaining injury.

“So who are you going to take then, Harry?” asked Ron.

“What? Oh, I was thinking about asking Luna,” answered Harry, not surprised to see both his friends’ astounded expressions. “I think she could be a right laugh, and at least I don’t have to worry about anybody spending too much time bothering me while I am with her.”

“Good point,” admitted Ron.

Hermione did not look at all pleased and Harry wondered if it was due to his reasoning for asking the Ravenclaw, or the realisation she would also have to listen to the girl’s strange theories.

“Ha! Got it,” said Harry pulling out his wand. “Immobilus!”

Immediately the few visible tentacles stopped moving, frozen like Neville with a Petrificus cast on him. Harry smiled and walked up to the trunk, easily prying apart the opening and retrieving several of the large seedpods.

“What?” he asked in response to the shocked expressions both Ron and Hermione gave him when he returned to the workbench with the cargo. “Just because magic doesn’t work that well for me, you don’t think I’m not going to use it when I can, do you?”

Neither had an answer to that.

Surprisingly, Harry was having a great time at the fussy professor’s party. Luna seemed to be going out of her way to entertain him with wildly fantastic stories.

Listening to the blonde girl thoroughly enthralling the rather batty looking Divination professor nearly gave Harry a stitch as he forced himself not to burst out laughing. Finally, he had to walk away for a breather, or risk collapsing with mirth.

Discovering Professor Snape dragging Draco off to have a private discussion was just too good an opportunity to miss, even if it was just to hear a good scolding.

Slipping an Extendable ear under the door, Harry strained listen to Draco astoundingly rude rejection of his mentor’s offers of help and demands of obedience. Once Draco stormed from the room, with Professor Snape following, Harry almost chose to retire from the party to go over what he had heard.

Realising neither Ron nor Hermione was likely to agree with his interpretation of the conversation, Harry decided to go back and see if the vampire would appreciate some of the blood-pops from his ever present stash of sweets.

Making a friend of a vampire was not an opportunity anybody should turn away from lightly. A friend like that could come on handy one day.

Or more likely, one night.

Harry stood next to Ron at the Burrow's kitchen sink, peeling a mountain of sprouts for Mrs. Weasley. They were once again discussing the over-heard conversation, when Ron's twin brothers interrupted.

"Aaah, George, look at this. They're using knives and everything. Bless them."

Ron's incredibly dull retort did little to perturb the twins as they settled down in chairs to watch the boys demonstrate the correct way to handle a knife. Harry took a different tactic.

"How much?" he asked.

"Now, now, Harrikins," said Fred. "We are wealthy businessmen, we can't be simply bribed with Galleons to go against Mum's wishes. Character-building stuff, learning to peel sprouts without magic."

"Okay, what then?"

"We need somebody to test a couple of our products," said Fred, slipping into a less jovial and more serious business attitude.

"Somebody who won't mind being a bit, er, incapacitated for an hour," said George.

"Or more, maybe," added Fred.

"No way," spluttered Ron. "I'm not doing that again."

"How many?" asked Harry, ignoring Ron. "What's the product and what's the trial aimed at?"

"Five," said Fred. "Bladder-Busters."

"We are having an issue with the delay before the effects start. We need data for various ages and body sizes."

“Are you mad, Harry?” said Ron. “It’s not worth it. You might not make it to the toilet in time if you don’t know when it is going to hit!”

“Done,” said Harry, holding out his hand.

George dropped five brightly coloured lollies into Harry’s hand while Fred waved his wand at the sprouts.

Mrs Weasley walked in just in time to see the last sprout magically fall into the cleaned pile.

“Boys, it’s wonderful you want to help you brother and Harry, but they really should have done it themselves,” she scolded lightly.

“It’s no bother, Mum,” said Fred, while Ron grumbled quietly.

“Just because they can’t use magic, doesn’t mean we should let them suffer,” added George, trying to sound magnanimous.

Harry stayed silent until the issue of who was staying in whose room came up.

“What about the tent we used at the world cup?” he asked. “Can Mr Weasley still get a hold of it?”

“It’s far too cold outside for camping,” dismissed Mrs Weasley.

“Who said you had to set it up outside?” asked Harry.

The silence following his statement had him thinking he must have said something silly, until Ron broke the silence.

“Sometimes, Harry, I wonder why you weren’t sorted into Ravenclaw,” he said.

Uncharacteristically, Harry found himself blushing.

“I just don’t get it, Remus,” said Harry. “If the Greyback is such a problem, why doesn’t somebody just do him in?”

“Harry!” said Remus, apparently shocked at the cold-blooded suggestion. “We can’t just solve our problems by killing everybody who disagrees with us. That would make us as bad as the Death Eaters.”

Harry shrugged.

Years of trying to convince people he wasn’t the person the Dursleys portrayed him as taught Harry some harsh lessons about the futility of reversing opinions with logic alone. People wanted to believe the worst they were being told. Some seemed practically addicted to the most horrid rumours and gossip around, but if you could remove the source of those lies, even for a little while, things usually got significantly better.

“It’s the law,” he said. “He bit you, so he already has a death sentence. Instead of trying to argue with him, you should be finding ways to eliminate him altogether. Just makes sense really.”

Harry felt uncomfortable under the look his former professor gave him, but he knew that he would not hesitate to bring justice to a creature famous for attacking defenceless children.

Harry watched the Minister of Magic as he stumbled away from the Burrow, Percy Weasley struggling to help the man, who was apparently in a great deal of pain.

“What happened?” asked Ron, coming with Ginny and the twins to stand beside him in the garden watching the two men hastily depart.

“He asked me to be a poster boy,” answered Harry bitterly. “He wanted me to tell everybody how the Ministry is doing a great job.”

“Tell him to sod off, didn’t you?” laughed Ron.

“No, actually,” said Harry, causing his friend to almost choke. “I said I would be interested, but there needs to be something more in it for me.”

“You did what?” spluttered Ron. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am,” said Harry. “I told him I’d be happy to show my support for the Ministry, once they showed their support for me. I said I wanted them to exclude me and my friends from underage magic laws, force every person formerly accused of being a Death Eater to a Veritaserum questioning, release every innocent person they currently hold, seize all assets of convicted Death Eaters and redistribute them to the victims of war, make blood purity prejudice illegal, and then pay me a thousand Galleons for each photo I appear in or visit I make to the Ministry.

“Oh, and also provide safe houses and free Wolfsbane to all werewolves, with Umbridge having to clean up the rooms in the morning.”

“Blimey. What did he say to that?”

“Well, I was hoping he would start bargaining, you know, make a ridiculous counter offer so I would lowered my demands and meet somewhere in the middle. Instead, he starts shooting off about how I owe it to the people and rot like that. He seemed to actually think it was my responsibility to prop up his government’s image.”

“What’d you do to him?” asked Ginny, already grinning in anticipation.

“I gave him a Bladder-Buster lolly,” said Harry, grinning back. “Two actually, since he stuck around blathering on for so long. Told him it was a bad habit I picked up from Dumbledore.

It took several minutes before they stopped laughing enough to re-enter the kitchen and repeat the story for the others.

“Well I didn’t say I was going to test them on myself!” said Harry, once the laughing died down. “I just hope Hermione doesn’t find out I sent the rest to Kreacher for Christmas with strict instructions about eating them.”

Harry dawdled behind, taking an inordinate amount of time to do up his bag. Neither Ron nor Hermione wished him luck as they left; both looked rather annoyed.

Like using the Bezoar, Harry was trying a desperate, almost cheeky gamble.

“Come on, now, Harry, you'll be late for your next lesson,” said Slughorn affably, snapping shut his briefcase.

“Sir,” said Harry. “I need your, er, discrete help, and possibly a favour.”

Slughorn looked positively shocked, then delighted as he seemed to realise the implications of what Harry just said.

“Professor Dumbledore has given me a task, something he seems to think I will be able to do that he can't,” said Harry. “Sir, he has tasked me with getting from you the true, unaltered memory of Tom Riddle asking about Horcruxes.”

Slughorn's face changed rapidly, cycling from delight and curiosity to fear and anger in the blink of an eye. Harry sighed, knowing that, this time, his gamble had failed.

Still, it was only his first attempt.  
Dear Mr Potter,

Unfortunately, while our researchers we have discretely discovered the titles and suspected locations of several rare tomes possibly containing information on the subject you have enquired about, Ministry law prohibits possession or dissemination of their content in this country. In the interests of fulfilling your request as best as possible, please find enclosed the list of volumes, their suspected locations, and all available references we have found on the subject matter.

We here at Kwickspell would like to take this opportunity to once again thank you for your continued patronage and more than generous donation to our annual Christmas party. We hope your holiday season was as enjoyable as our own.

Harry smiled after reading the letter. Unlike his previous correspondence with the company still supplementing his Hogwarts education, this letter came from a senior manager and contained much more information than expected. Then again, a few hundred Galleons was not a small investment, but at least this portion of it was paying off.

He wished there was some way he could let Vernon Dursley know that one of his undoubtedly exaggerated bragging claims about 'greasing the wheels' had actually helped Harry.

It would be such a sweet revenge.

The ring he was trying to Apparate into lay empty on the floor in front of Harry, silently mocking him. The potential of unlimited freedom offered by the ability to cross any distance in the blink of an eye, was tantalisingly out of reach, just feet away.

Apparating was difficult, often resulting in painful and even deadly Splinching, should it not go right, but fear was not holding Harry back. It was his magical strength, or lack of it, that was sure to keep this skill impossible for Harry to obtain.

There was no trick, no precise wand movement or clarity of thought that could boost his meagre power enough to move him even the few feet to where the taunting ring lay. He travelled side-along with Professor Dumbledore, and knew exactly what the magic felt like, but the ability was forever beyond his reach, no matter how long he practiced or how determined he was.

Only a few of the spells from the margins of the Half Blood Prince's book even began to approach the power of a normal wizard when cast by Harry, surprising him as much as Ron when he friend was wrenched to the ceiling one morning by the only non-verbal spell Harry had ever cast.

No firmly fixed destination, no finely focussed determination, and no deliberate movement would move Harry even a centimetre, if he didn't walk it by the power of his own two legs.



"Maybe making Port-keys would be easier?" he thought, just as Susan Bones spectacularly separated her leg from the rest of her body.

Draco Malfoy's regular absences finally engaged Harry's attention, as much as a way to distract himself from Ron and Lavender as anything else. His best friend's girlfriend was absurdly annoying, and their constant spit swapping drove both Harry and Hermione away from the red-headed boy in disgust.

"Kreacher," called Harry.

There was a loud crack and two fighting elves appeared on the floor in front of Harry, apparently trying to beat each other senseless.

Before Harry could sort out exactly what was going on, another crack signalled the arrival of Peeves, the resident Poltergeist.

"I was watching that, Potty!" he told Harry indignantly.

"Dobby will shut Kreacher's mouth for insulting Harry Potter!" cried Dobby in a high-pitched voice.

Harry watched the two fighting for a second, stunned by the ferocity. Since Dobby seemed to be getting in the better blows, Harry wasn't motivated to stop the brawl just yet. Peeves excitedly pelted the pair with bits of chalk, his aim unerringly accurate, and giving Harry a new idea.

Dudley's miniscule imagination often plotted relatively devious attacks on Harry, and while most of them were easy enough to avoid, far too many had succeeded because Harry did not take the initiative. This proved to Harry that a good defence wasn't the best way to survive; sometimes you had to strike first.

"Peeves," he said, taking a small Stinksap filled water pistol and a handful of Dungbombs from his pocket. "You know who Draco Malfoy is, don't you?"

Having Draco followed by Kreacher, and possibly Dobby as well, was still a good plan that he would follow, but nobody could get in somebody's face the way the Poltergeist would. That would cause Draco more problems than Harry could possibly manage, assuming the creature took bribes.

The best bit was that Draco was unlikely to run off and get help from a teacher, and Peeves was unlikely to let up while Harry continued to supply him.

Harry took a carefully measured gulp of the little bottle of liquid luck. Slowly, a wonderful feeling of exhilaration flooded every corner of his being.

"Right," he said, standing up. "I'm off to the library."

"You've got to go and see Slughorn, remember?" said Hermione.

"Nope," said Harry confidently. "Slughorn's memory can't be that important. I am going to go to the library and see if I can find something that will defeat old Voldy, or at least makes the odds against him just a bit more even.

"Let's see just how lucky I can get, eh?"

Harry staggered towards the castle, swaying so wildly along the path that he left it completely several times and once ended up face down in a bush. Luckily, it wasn't a long a walk from Hagrid's hut, although crawling definitely took more time.

"Luck," Harry snorted. "Fat load of good luck is."

The strange coincidences and occurrences driving him to witness Aragog's funeral, with the half-giant and the potion master, were nothing short of ridiculously contrived. Instead of finding a secret or hidden magic in the library that would give him a way to combat the evil wizard that was his nemesis, Harry now had the bottled memory Professor Dumbledore was so keen for him to obtain.

Like the old man himself couldn't spurge on a couple of bottles of Rosemerta's finest to get 'Sluggo', as he insisted Harry now call him, well and truly liquored up enough to divulge the secret.

"Old bugger probably can't handle a drink," slurred Harry snidely, as he once again dragged himself upright.

Of course, disguising himself and sneaking off, to buy a lottery ticket and place a few Hippogriff racing bets, probably wasn't the wisest thing to do. Nor was celebrating his windfall with a few drinks before trying to sneak back into the school, but deciding to stop by Hagrid's place for a few consolatory gallons of wine had gone horribly wrong.

Not only did Slughorn catch him out of bounds, but poor timing meant having to watch the whole morbid funeral of something that once tried to feed him to its offspring, while trying to look sorry. Luckily, his recently purchased stocks of wines and liquors were enough to tempt both of the professors into an extended bout of 'sampling'.

Sirius taught Harry the value of a fine wine and its various uses as a 'social lubricant', a welcomed gift, and the sign of a good host. Vernon and Marge showed Harry the ugly side of alcohol. Now Slughorn and Hagrid proved there was more than one way to skin a dragon, once mind altering substances were introduced.

"Luck be damned," mumbled Harry.

It was planning for contingencies that made sure Harry had a good supply of various products on him, cunning that kept him drinking anywhere near as much as the other two, and determination that finally dragged the memory from the reluctant Slughorn - not luck.

If the potion was good for anything, except manoeuvring Harry into a situation he could take advantage of, it would get him to his dorm intact, and make sure he didn't suffer any debilitating after-effects of over indulgence in the morning

Tunelessly humming an inappropriate ditty learned in the previous few hours, Harry resumed his shaky progress towards the castle.

At least ol' Dumbles should be happy.

The twisted and broken body of Draco Malfoy lay on the floor of the bathroom, bleeding copiously from a gaping wound in his side. Harry fell to his knees beside Malfoy, who was shaking uncontrollably in a pool of his own blood.

Moaning Myrtle let out a deafening scream: "MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM! MURDER!"

Next to him, Harry's crossbow lay discarded, the tip of the automatically loaded bolt glistening with the potion he had found in the Prince's diary.

Not knowing if a gun would work in a magical area like Hogwarts, or even where he could get one to begin with, Harry brewed the improved blasting potion and used the extraordinarily potent mixture in place of the Draught of Living Death he normally used to enhance his bolts.

The idea was sound, and testing showed it worked, exploding on impact after being fired from the crossbow, but the reality of Malfoy's mutilated body shocked him beyond anything he had ever felt before. Nothing could prepare him for seeing a real person half blown to bits. The knowledge that he did it to stop Malfoy hitting him with the Cruciatus curse was no comfort.

The door banged open as Snape burst into the room, his face livid.

It was the first and only time Harry was actually glad to see the man. Harry sat copying out the faded and worn detention cards, a smile never far from his face. While the actual work was boring and useless, the sheer number of pranks and misdeeds his father and his friends were caught doing threatened to make Harry laugh aloud, despite having Snape sitting silently in the same room.

Reading between the lines, Harry couldn't help be amazed and delighted by the pranks and jinxes involved in many of the instances recorded in sometimes meticulous, almost anal, detail by the caretaker. Many of the cards related directly to stories Sirius and

Remus enthralled Harry with; the memories of hearing the tales mixing with the actual stories themselves to make this the best detention Harry had ever served.

He took particular pleasure in imagining the frequent ones that involved his snarky professor as the recipient.

The number of ideas for Weasley products that just a single detention provided made Harry almost grateful for the opportunity, although he knew Snape intended the punishment to embarrass or disturb him. If he had been able to do it without Snape seeing, he would take notes more studiously than in any class.

Still, while the hardest part of the detention was not laughing aloud, Harry would much preferred to have been out with the rest of the school watching Ginny and Cho vie for the Snitch and the cup. Dumbledore drew himself up to his full height.

"I will take you with me to retrieve this Horcrux on one condition: that you obey any command I might give you at once, and without question."

"What? No way."

"Then I am afraid I cannot risk having you along," said Dumbledore sadly.

"Hang on, hang on," said Harry quickly. "I didn't say I wouldn't do what you ordered, just that I would do it without question."

Dumbledore did not smile.

"Harry, it is imperative that you trust my judgement. This is the only condition that I am asking of you. If I should order you to run, to hide, or to save yourself, you must obey without hesitation."

Harry felt his temper rising again.

"Tell me, Headmaster, do you think so little of my own judgement then, that you do not trust me to be anything more than a House-elf to

you?” snapped Harry. “I trust you, and if you order me to do something, I will do my outmost best to comply, but I won’t promise that I will obey your every command without at least taking a second to decide for myself if it is the right thing to do – Only Voldemort and Death Eaters have that sort of arrangement.

“I am almost a squib, not almost an idiot.”

Several of the portraits yelled their outrage at Harry’s impertinence. Phineas was actually trying to cast hexes at Harry, waving his wand and screaming curses.

“Harry, you put me in a very difficult position,” sighed the Headmaster, showing no shock at Harry’s words. “I am reluctant to take you into danger, knowing that if we encounter difficulties, you may endanger your own life in a futile attempt to save mine.”

“Sir, if something happened, and I did nothing to try and save you when I could have, just how do you think I would be able to live with myself after that?”

Harry held Dumbledore’s penetrating gaze for a few moments, almost challenging him to withdraw the invitation and renege on his promise.

When the old man sighed and looked away, Harry managed to resist crowing in triumph – barely.

“Professor,” Harry suddenly asked as they made their way towards the Hog’s Head Tavern. “Will we be Apparating?”

“Yes,” said the Headmaster. “I will of course be assisting you.”

Harry nodded and stayed silent until another thought crossed his mind.

“Sir, why don’t you just take a Portkey from your office? That way nobody would know you left the castle.”

Dumbledore smiled, his beard twitching in the bright moonlight.

“A wonderful suggestion, Harry, that I will endeavour to make use of next time. However, we have almost arrived where I intend to leave from, so let us continue as I planned.”

A warm glow of pride at the compliment replaced the nervousness he had been feeling since discovering Dumbledore's plans to include him in the Horcrux retrieval;

Momentarily.

“Hang on,” said Harry. “Are you suggesting we climb down this very dangerous cliff using just those slippery little handholds, then swim over that patch of water that we know nothing about, into a cave that we have no idea of what's inside.”

“You can of course stay behind, should you choose to,” said Dumbledore. “I will think no less of you for it.”

“No, no,” Harry said quickly. “It just that I don't know how to swim, and your plan doesn't sound particularly well thought out, or safe, sir. I mean there could be undertows or sharks or anything!”

“What would you suggest?”

“Well ropes and hook things for starters, like the mountain climbers use so that we can't just fall off, and a little boat at the bottom, a canoe or something, so we don't have to swim. Or maybe even just life jackets or at least rubber rings or something.

“Better yet, what about conjuring a boat here and then just levitating us both down to the water in it?”

“I am very glad that I brought you along, Harry,” said the Headmaster, waving his wand in a complicated matter to make a narrow boat spring into existence out of nowhere. “I sometimes tend to forget that I am no longer as sprightly as I once used to be.”

Harry smiled and climbed into the boat, very happy that he was going along and had insisted on having some say in how they tackled the

challenges they faced. He could only imagine how much trouble the Headmaster would get himself into otherwise.

The ripples of whatever had leaped out of the lake inside the cavern, to drag Dumbledore's conjured boat under the surface, disappeared unnaturally fast, sending chills of fear up Harry's spine.

"Good thing you decided to try that without us in it first, sir," said Harry sincerely.

"Indeed," agreed Dumbledore.

"There is nothing to be feared from a body, Harry, any more than there is anything to be feared from the darkness. Lord Voldemort, who of course secretly fears both, disagrees. Once again, he reveals his own lack of wisdom. It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more."

Harry paused; he did not want to argue, but he found the idea of a creature leaping out of the water and dragging him to a horrible, watery death, unnerving, to say the least.

"But one of them jumped," he said, trying to make his voice as calm as Dumbledore's. "It dragged your empty boat under."

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I am sure that once we take the Horcrux, we shall find them less peaceable. However, like many creatures that dwell in cold and darkness, they fear light and warmth, which we shall therefore call to our aid should the need arise. Fire, Harry," Dumbledore added with a smile.

"Right," said Harry, putting the crossbow back into his pocket and removing a Flaming-throwing-flare instead.

He really hoped he did not have to test the twin's claims that the fire would burn underwater, but for some reason, he was expecting it.

"Harry, it will be your job to make sure I keep drinking, even if you have to tip the potion into my protesting mouth. Do you understand?"

Their eyes met over the basin, each pale face lit with that strange, green light. Harry did not speak. Was this why he was invited, to



force-feed Dumbledore a potion that might cause him unendurable pain?

Dumbledore moved, about to lower the conjured crystal goblet into the potion.

“Wait!” said Harry. “Just give me a second.”

Surprisingly, the Headmaster withheld his hand.

“Sir, just how big a goblet can you fit into the basin?” asked Harry. “Can you make one big enough to scoop all of it out in one go?”

“Perhaps, Harry, but I fear the Horcrux will not appear unless the potion has been consumed,” answered Dumbledore.

A smile suddenly spread over Harry’s face.

“Sir, have you ever heard of Bulimia?”

Who could have guessed Petunia’s obsession with skeletal super models and skinny movie stars would ever teach Harry something useful?

Dumbledore, his retching of the potion over, suddenly pushed Harry away and staggered to the water’s edge. Before Harry could stop him, he cupped water from the lake into his hands and drank it.

The surface of the lake started churning as white heads and hands emerged from the dark water: an army of the dead rose from the black water, heading for the island.

Harry fumbled in his pocket for the flare he had put away, as a Dumbledore struggled weakly with an Inferi attempting to drag him into the water. With a yell, Harry ducked under the pale hands trying to grapple him and tore the flare from his pocket, hitting the igniter with his other hand.

Instantly, a blinding, five-foot long flame erupted from one end, incinerating the Inferi holding the professor. In mere seconds, Harry

cleared the island of the undead, but more were trying to get out of the water, and the flare was starting to splutter.

Then Dumbledore was on his feet, a massive whip of crimson and gold flame flying from his wand to surround the island and keep the creatures back.

Harry sighed with relief as his flare gave one final belch and died completely.

“Sir, if I set fire to the water, will it keep them from attacking us?” he asked the Headmaster.

“I believe it may,” said Professor Dumbledore in a weak and croaky voice.

Harry nodded and rummaged in his pockets for a magically enlarged jar of a substance he learned about from one of Dudley’s graphic war movies. He wasn’t sure if the wizarding world had an equivalent to Napalm, but brewing the Muggle concoction had been ridiculously simple, even with his limited magical abilities.

It was dangerous stuff, but so were animated corpses. Dumbledore leaned heavily on Harry as they left the lake chamber. Although he had vomited the majority of the potion, what little he had absorbed was still more than enough to sicken him. Harry didn’t want to think about how bad it would have been if Dumbledore was forced to drink the whole basin.

“Professor, are you going to be able to Apparate?”

The headmaster didn’t reply for a moment, and Harry felt his heart tighten in his chest. He really wanted to get the headmaster to a healer as soon as possible.

“I may require a few moments to regain some strength,” said the professor.

“What about making a Portkey?” asked Harry. “We should go directly to Saint Mungos.”

“An excellent idea, but I require the services of Professor Snape. I shall create a Portkey to the school, although my accuracy may suffer slightly, in my current debilitated state.”

“Okay,” said Harry, a bit surprised and annoyed that Dumbledore wanted Snape rather than professional healers. “If you think that’s best.”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore, waving his wand at a rock and intoning the incantation. “Let us go home.”

For some reason, Harry wasn’t feeling very relieved at the prospect. “No, Draco,” said Dumbledore quietly to the trembling boy. “It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now.”

Malfoy did not speak. His mouth was open, his wand hand still shaking. Suddenly, just as his wand began to lower, his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the ground unconscious.

“Harry?” asked a very surprised Dumbledore. “How did you escape my spell?”

“Your spell?” asked Harry. “Something hit me, but it was stopped by the twins’ shield clothing. Why did you try to spell me?”

Dumbledore looked completely dumfounded. “I wanted to give Mr Malfoy a chance to turn his back on the Dark Lord.”

“I figured you weren’t just stalling for time, otherwise I would have coshed him sooner. Now, let’s get you to the infirmary.”

“No, Harry, I am afraid that my strength has fled. Please go directly to Professor Snape and tell him what has occurred then bring him to me here.”

Suddenly, Harry wished he had a broom and a slightly better flying ability. It would only have taken a minute to dash over to the infirmary. Shaking his head to clear it of pointless speculation, Harry ran to the door leading down.

He would get Snape, and Pomfrey – to do anything else made no sense.

The fight at the bottom of the stairs caught Harry up. He was pinned down by all the spell fire, unable to break free and get to the infirmary.

Snape ran past him in the opposite direction going towards Dumbledore almost as soon as Harry made it into the tower, so at least something had gone right. He didn't know how Snape knew he was needed, but at least the headmaster would be getting some help.

So far, his crossbow accounted for two Death Eaters, and the shielded clothes he and his friends wore was keeping them safe and in the fight, but precious minutes had gone by and he still couldn't get clear of the battle.

"It's over, time to go!" shouted Snape, somehow dragging an Eaten Draco passed the fight and around the corner at the far end of the corridor.

For a moment, Harry didn't understand. The Death Eaters were still there, fighting him and the others. What did Snape mean it was over?

The large blonde Death Eater he was trying to stick with a crossbow suddenly cast a massive blasting spell, almost bringing the ceiling down, then turned and ran after Snape, with the last two Death Eaters following quickly behind.

Cold terror and panic gripped Harry's stomach as he ignored his friends' calls. He ran back up the stairs to where he had left Dumbledore. Outside, he found what he feared.

Dumbledore, the greatest wizard in the world, was dead.

Harry fired another weak Stupefy from his wand, and watched angrily as the vile man batted it aside with a negligent flick of his wand.

"At least you have decided to fight like a wizard, Potter, but you don't have the nerve or ability to combat me," sneered Snape.

Harry didn't wait for Snape to finish, but fired his crossbow directly him. Snape, caught by surprise, nearly didn't knock the bolt aside in time. It exploded spectacularly mere feet from him.

"You dare use my own creations against me?" shouted Snape, firing spell after spell at Harry, battering him mercilessly. "That's right! I am the Half Blood Prince; it is my potions book you have been stealing credit for all year."

The shield spells on his clothing were wearing out, and Harry knew he was going to be in trouble very soon. Concentrating as he had never done before, Harry raised his wand and fired the strongest spell he could manage: a Reducto. At the same time, he fired his crossbow, aiming at a rock a few feet to the side of Snape.

Snape again battered the spell aside easily, but either ignored or missed the crossbow bolt. It was a mistake.

"Pathet-" Snape began, but never finished as the bolt hit the ground and exploded, spraying him with shards of stone, cutting his face and side in several places.

Harry smiled evilly, pleased to see his gambit worked, and fired another bolt, this one on target to leave a large hole in his former professor's chest. Just as he pulled the trigger, Snape recovered enough to hit him with another spell, spoiling his aim.

There was loud bang and Harry flew through the air to land painfully several feet away; the last of his shields finally having given way. Looking up from his prone position, he saw Snape running full pelt towards the edge of the school boundaries.

"COWARD," Harry yelled. "COME BACK YOU GUTLESS CHICKEN."

He was surprised to see Snape hesitate at his words, before apparently changing his mind and Apparating away. Harry rose and turned to see Hagrid stumbling from his hut, his massive dog cradled in his arms in front of him, like a baby.

Deep in his pockets, Harry had a Muggle Chemical fire extinguisher. Bought and magically modified to ensure any accidents involving fire could easily be brought under control, it would help save at least some of the Grounds keeper's house.

Relief at seeing the man who rescued him from the Dursley's home pushed back the grief Harry knew was waiting for a weak moment to pounce, but, for the moment, Harry forced himself to feel only the joy.

The rest would come later.

With the end of Professor Dumbledore's funeral, and the unpleasant confrontation with the minister, Harry was unsurprised, but immensely grateful, to find his friends supporting him.

"We're with you whatever happens," said Ron. "But, mate, you're going to have to come round my mum and dad's house before we do anything else, even Godric's Hollow."

"Why?"

"Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember?"

Harry didn't know whether he should laugh or cry. The thought of putting his quest on hold to attend a wedding was too surrealistic to contemplate properly.

"Okay," he said. "But there's something we need to do even before that. There's a certain portrait we need to talk to, and it had better have some answers, or I am going to get that tin of paint remover I have and see if it really is as strong as the store keeper promised me."

I have tried hard not to let this become a canon-bashing story, or a crack-fic, but some bits have slipped through! Thanks again to all of the reviewers, referers, and the guys at AFC. All of your comments and suggestions have helped shape this story. I hope you like it enough to leave me feedback now that it is completed.

Year Seven

Faced with the escape plan devised by supposedly the foremost anti-Voldemort organisation there was, Harry did the only thing he could; he started laughing.

"This is not a laughing matter, Potter," growled Mad-eye. "Now give us some hair and we will all be on our way."

Harry fought down his mirth, ignoring the strange looks the others were giving him.

"Okay, okay," said Harry. "Just give me a second to go over this again. You think the best way to get me out of here is to have a half a dozen copies of me zooming about on Thestrals, brooms, and a flying motorbike, as decoys?"

"Harry, it's the only way we can get you away without alerting the Ministry or the Death Eaters," said Hermione. "If we use any other magic, like Apparition, the Trace will record it, and they have made it an imprisonable offence to connect this house to the Floo Network, place a Portkey here, or Apparate in or out."

"You'll be going to Tonks's parents," said Remus. "Once you're within the boundaries of the protective enchantments we've put on their house you'll be able to use a Portkey to the Burrow."

"Hang on," said Harry, putting a hint of sarcasm in his words. "Here's an idea: I have an invisibility cloak, and Hagrid has a motorcycle with a sidecar..."

Some time later, the ever-nosey residents of Privet drive were gifted with the extraordinary sight of a very large man inexpertly riding an equally huge motorcycle down the street. The scandal and excitement caused by the appearance of such a hooligan, in the

normally quiet suburb, took weeks to die down, despite the absence of the top gossipmonger, Petunia Dursley.

Floating high overhead, the Death Eaters paid no attention to the Muggle contraptions zooming along the narrow streets below, knowing there was no way an important person like Harry Potter would be risking his life in such a dangerous contraption.

Thanks to Mrs. Weasley's ministrations, George's wound was neat and clean, but Harry was not yet used to the dark hole in the side of his head, despite the twins' many jokes about it. The fact Snape managed to ambush Lupin and George, after they Apparated to their first stage safe house, still made Harry's blood boil. The unnatural sight of the missing ear served to remind him of the traitor.

"George," he said suddenly. "Have you seriously considered sticking on a fake ear?"

"Yeah," said George, "We even made up a few, but quite frankly, I like the idea of shocking people with it like it is."

Harry nodded, already suspecting as much.

"That's cool, but have you thought about what you could do with a replacement?"

George's eyes lit up. "You mean, like a prank ear? One that spins or moves or changes shape and colour or something?"

"Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of a modified extendable ear," said Harry, "Like Moody's eye that sees through walls and such. Imagine what you could do with a magical ear..."

George's eyes almost glowed as the possibilities sank in.

"Tell me, Minister," said Harry icily. "Do you really think that if Dumbledore had any idea how to stop Voldemort, he would have left it for the three of us to do?"

"Dumbledore must have taught thousands of students," Scrimgeour persevered. "Yet the only ones he remembered in his will are you three. Why is that?"



"Because I was quite close to him, obviously," said Harry in his best 'you are a moron' tone. "He knew me well, and through me, my friends. He probably knew Ron was thinking about being an Enchanter, Hermione loves books, and that Snitch was one my Dad used to play with all the time, so he left us all something special to remember him by."

"I think you are a liar, Mr Potter," said asked Scrimgeour. "Your unreliability is somewhat renowned."

Hermione and Ron leapt to their feet shouting objections, but Harry just laughed as he stood up. Too many people with much better verbal ammunition had tested Harry's patience over the years. Too many times he had been denied fair justice or reasonable attitudes. The ridiculous man in front of him playing petty games of power was less than nothing in comparison.

"Feel free to leave at any time, Minister, since you've made it perfectly clear that you make a lousy delivery owl, but what else can anybody expect from the Ministry of Incompetence?"

Scrimgeour raised his wand and took a step closer to Harry, but before he could say anything, he suddenly found a colourful Muggle gun almost resting between his eyes.

"You are not in school anymore--" he began, trying to sound threatening, but his eyes never left the strange looking weapon.

"And as of today I am no longer a minor, so get your hairy arse out of my friend's house, Sir."

"I . . . regret your attitude," he said, lowing his wand and taking a step backwards. "You seem to think that the Ministry does not desire what you and Dumbledore desired. We ought to be working together."

"It's your job to fight this war, Minister, not mine. Why don't you try doing what you are being paid for, for a change, and I'll just get on with living my life. Quit trying to find your answers in secrets and lies and do something constructive like arresting actual Death Eaters."

The Minister grunted and walked away, leaving Harry and his friends with their new possessions.

“So, what are we meant to do with this stuff?” asked Ron.

“Really Ronald, don’t you recall what Professor Dumbledore’s portrait told us, once Harry, er, encouraged it?”

“You mean threatened it with paint remover—”

“Yes, yes, the point is the Professor said it may come in handy while we are looking for the Horcruxes. At least that’s what I understood him to mean, unlike the silly, meaningless clues he gave me about this book.”

“Well I’m not planning on taking up smoking,” said Ron. “But at least I don’t have to get out of bed to turn the lights on and off anymore.”

“What’s in the pistol anyway?” he asked Harry, knowing many of the various concoctions Harry had loaded the toys with previously.

“Water,” said Harry. “It’s new and I was testing it - I hadn’t gotten around to putting anything else in it, yet.”

“Good bluff,” said Ron.

“Thanks. Now, let’s go to your dad’s shed then, shall we? I reckon he’ll have a hammer and chisel, or maybe a saw,” said Harry tossing the snitch up and catching again as it fluttered its wings weakly. “I don’t know about you, but I want to find out what’s inside this thing.” Mrs Weasley’s efforts to stop the trio from spending time together planning were becoming rather annoying.

It was futile of course, especially when they could simply use the Muffliato spell to avoid anybody overhearing once they were in bed, but not much planning remained anyway.

Harry had no idea what she thought they had been doing for the weeks before he left Privet Drive, but she somehow got it into her

head that stopping them from being alone now would prevent them from eventually leaving.

All it achieved was to make them all short tempered.

Harry listened, outraged as Elphias and Muriel argued about Dumbledore. While he thought he had squeezed a lot out of the surly portrait at Hogwarts, it only now occurred to him how woefully under-informed he really was.

So it used to be common practice to ship Squibs off to the Muggle world, or possibly lock them up in a basement and pretend they didn't exist.

Harry's time at the Dursley's suddenly took a completely new, and quite disturbing, aspect. He himself had witnessed the headmaster's less than respectful attitude towards Muggles, but at the time, he dismissed it because it was just the Dursleys. Now it suddenly looked a lot more sinister.

When Kinglsey's warning and the inevitable attack finally came, it was almost a relief for Harry to have something to distract him from thoughts of Dumbledore's duplicity or the possibility of murdering Ron's slanderous Aunt Muriel with a half full Champagne bottle.

"What are we going to do with them?" Ron whispered to Harry quietly. "Kill them?"

Hermione shuddered and took a step backward away from the unconscious duo. Dolohov and Rowle lay unconscious on the floor of the Muggle café from the blast caused by Harry's Crossbow bolt.

He really wanted to question them; to find out how they had located him so quickly, and anything else they might know about the Dark Lord's plans, but there was no time. More Death Eaters might follow close behind.

"No," he said in response to Ron's very valid suggestion. "Maybe we can modify their memories and put them off the scent.

"Hermione, you done some fine work on your parents, can you fix this pair up so they go gallivanting half way across the country

supposedly chasing us? Ideally I want them to keep thinking they are seeing us in different places, but just sending them elsewhere will do fine."

Hermione looked worried. "I knew my parents rather well, and they agreed to let me. I am not sure if it will work with people I don't know, or who resist me."

"Right keep it simple then. Lose the fight and put in a memory of hearing us talking about going to Hogsmeade and then Hogwarts before Apparating away. We'll fix this place up, get under the cloak and then wake them up. With luck, they'll either go after us immediately or go report back to their boss."

Hermione nodded and began preparing herself for the task. Ron started repairing the damage, somewhat inexpertly, but well enough to pass a casual inspection. With nothing else to do, Harry did the only other thing he thought might help.

He stole their wallets.

"Oh, don't start that again!" sighed Hermione. "I thought we'd settled this."

"It's one thing hanging around the Ministry entrances under the Cloak, but this is different, Hermione." Ron jabbed a finger at a copy of the Daily Prophet dated a week previously. "You're on the list of Muggle-borns who didn't present themselves for interrogation!"

"And you're supposed to be dying of Spattergroit at the Burrow, and Harry's got a ten-thousand-Galleon price on his head. There are several wizarding genealogy books in the Black library here - it can't be too hard to make up a foolproof family tree for me, for all of us actually. "

Harry suddenly went silent, plans of invading the Ministry and tracking down Delores Umbridge and Slytherin's locket dissolving as the answer presented itself literally in front of him.

"Harry? Are you okay?" asked Hermione.

“You’re not going. None of us are going,” he said.

“That’s right - What?” said Ron, a bit loudly as he was still fired up from the aborted argument.

“I said we’re not going,” repeated Harry, turning to look at them. “We’ve been going about this the wrong way – storming the Ministry to steal the locket from Umbridge – that’s just suicidal. What we need to do is find where she lives.”

“How can we do that?” asked Hermione. “She is one of the senior Ministry members, and has a Floo connection to her home.”

“Yeah, but there has to be records. Isn’t every witch and wizard’s residence recorded?”

“Well yeah,” said Ron. “In the Ministry...”

“So we just need to get the record of where she lives and get her there. No way will it be as protected, and nobody will be expecting it. I bet she still has a bottle of Veritaserum in her purse too.”

“But that still means going into the Ministry,” said Hermione, obviously confused and unable to follow Harry’s logic.

“We, don’t,” said Harry, his eyes returning to the answer and a smile appearing on his face.

Both Harry’s friends turned to see what he was looking at.

The transformed Kreacher, in his immaculate white fluffy tea towel, seemed to feel the three sets of eyes on him and turned from the sink where he was doing the dishes.

“Yes, Master?” he asked, looking slightly self-conscious at the attention he was getting.

“Okay, we’ve got the locket, now what do we do with Umbridge?” asked Ron. “Are we going to modify her memory and send her back, like we did with those two at the café, or give her to Kreacher to punish for stealing Regulus’s locket?”

“No,” said Harry, the finality in his tone caused the gagged and bound woman to start shaking in fear.

“Harry,” said Hermione worriedly. “You can’t just murder her in cold blood. It’s not right.”

“Be doing the world a favour,” said Ron. “You heard what she’s been doing to Muggleborns at the Ministry. What do you reckon she would have done to you if you had shown up like you were meant to?”

Hermione started arguing, but Harry wasn’t listening. Up to this point in time, he had convinced himself he could kill somebody who deserved it, and there was no doubt the vile woman in front of him did. The things she had described while under the influence of her own Veritaserum made Harry want to strangle her with his bare hands, but now he faced having to actually do the deed, and found it, disturbing.

“There are worse things than death,” he said, playing with the locket they had taken from their prisoner.

“What?” asked Ron. “What did you say?”

“Something Dumbledore said to the Dark Lord – There are worse things than death,” explained Harry. “Hermione, how good are you at human transfiguration? Didn’t you study it last year?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly. “We only got as far as changing things like hair colour, but it was all very simple. I know the theory...”

“Reckon you can turn her into an animal, like Moody did with Malfoy?”

Ron started laughing and even Hermione smiled.

“I think I can manage that,” she said. “It’s not like I can’t have several tries at it until I get it right. Do I need to ask what kind of animal?”

“I think that would be fairly obvious,” said Harry. “There’s a rather lovely pond not too far from my old home that’s pretty secluded. Hell,

I'll even have a word with a few of the local snakes to make sure she doesn't try to leave.

"I do hope they can tell one toad apart from another."

On the ground, Umbridge started shaking even harder.

"We have to leave," said Hermione, starting to grab everything in sight to jam into her small bag. "Grimauld place, we have to go. As soon as possible."

"What? Why?" asked Harry.

"Snape," she said, nodding towards the paper proclaiming the change of staffing at Hogwarts.

She finished packing everything off the table and was stuffing what, for a second, looked like the troll's leg umbrella stand into her purse.

"I don't get it. Didn't Moody curse him so that he couldn't tell anybody and wouldn't be able to return?" asked Ron.

"Yes, but now Snape is in charge of the school. How long do you think it will be before somebody comes up with the idea of forcing one of the others to tell them the secret or bring them here?" said Hermione emptying a draw of cutlery into her tiny bag.

"What, you mean McGonagall or someone?" huffed Ron. "Fat chance they got of forcing anything out of her."

"Ginny," said Harry, his heart constricting. "They might try Ginny."

Ron's face paled.

"We'll have to get a note to somebody to tell them we aren't here," said Harry. "That way there will be no reason to try and resist."

"We can ask Kreacher to take a note to Remus explaining everything," said Hermione, not slowing down in her packing.

"Where are we going to go?" asked Ron.

"I was thinking of the forest where the world cup was. It is secluded, enclosed and undercover. I have a tent so we can camp."

"Not bad, Hermione," said Harry, "but why don't we just go a bit further and stay at the Muggle camping ground there instead?"

Sometimes, the logic of wizards infected even the best of them. "It's the Horcrux," said Hermione. "It's affecting whoever is carrying it."

Harry nodded, understanding now why he had been feeling increasingly morbid until removing the locket from around his neck. The vague Voldemort visions had become increasingly clear too, bringing with them more mysteries and questions with no answers.

"Maybe we should take it in turns," suggested Ron. "You know, share it round so it doesn't get too much for one person."

"Nah," said Harry, opening the bag Hagrid had given him that still hang around his neck. I'll keep it in here, and if it still affects me, we'll try moving it into Hermione's purse.

"Last thing we need is to get possessed or something."

"We are running short on food," said Ron despondently, as they sat in the tent on a riverbank in Wales eating some poorly cooked fish.

Their Muggle cash was running low, and they had no way to exchange galleons for more without risking capture. The supplies taken from Grimmauld place were not lasting very long.

Harry knew what real hunger felt like. If he tried, he could recall the pangs that plagued him when he went for days without enough food at the Dursleys'. He would do everything he could to make sure his friends never experienced those pains.

"Mum can make good food appear out of thin air," said Ron wistfully.

"It's impossible to make good food out of nothing!" snapped Hermione, once again in a rather irritable mood.



It was her turn to cook, and didn't appreciate the implied criticism of her efforts.

"You can Summon it if you know where it is, you can transform it, you can increase the quantity if you've already got some –"

"What?" interrupted Harry. "What did you say?"

"I said you can't make food out of thin air-"

"No after that. What did you say about increasing the quantity?"

"I said you can increase the quantity if you already have some – oh, of course," she said, suddenly looking a bit sheepish.

"Engorgio!" she said waving her wand over an apple.

Obediently, the fruit swelled to about three times its normal size.

"Now that's more like it," said Ron, eagerly pushing away the remains of his dinner to grab the enormous apple.

"How often can we do that to one thing?" asked Harry, watching Ron chomp into oversized fruit.

"Not indefinitely," said Hermione. "But more than enough to keep us well fed for several months, even without buying anything else."

"Good," said Harry, looking at the stream. "I never did learn how to fish, and using Accio feels like cheating.

"Mr Black," said Harry, addressing the obstinate portrait. "Unless you begin to cooperate, you are a waste of space to us."

"Impertinent child!" yelled the blindfolded painting.

"Yes," agreed Harry. "And very disrespectful, not to mention I am sure you know what it was we did to your grand daughter's painting when she wouldn't do as we asked."

The painting was suddenly silent.

"That's better," said Harry. "Now, we have some questions to ask Dumbledore's portrait, not when Snape or anybody else can hear mind you, and you had better be honest or I'll find the most disgusting sewer imaginable and leave you there with a binding spell to lock you into this frame."

"You wouldn't dare!" snapped the outraged painting. "Besides, you do not have the ability."

"I do," said Hermione, sounding rather vicious.

The painting somehow paled.

"You are Potter?" whispered Bathilda Bagshot, sounding very faint and far away.

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but a sharp indrawn gasp sounded from behind him, then the red light of a stunning spell leapt out of nowhere to hit the woman. As hastily planned when Bathilda indicated she wanted to lead Harry off alone, Hermione had followed them up under the invisibility cloak – again watching Harry's back for him.

Instead of slumping to the floor unconscious from Hermione's spell, Bathilda practically exploded, and a huge snake unwound from the place she had been standing.

Nagini hissed angrily and threw herself at Harry, knocking his half-drawn crossbow aside as she sank her fangs into his arm. Harry screamed and tried to pull the snake's head off him, but it held on too tight.

In the back of his mind, he felt a foreign surge of excitement, and suddenly knew Voldemort was on his way.

Hermione cast another spell, hitting the thrashing snake in one of its massive coils. Blood spurted out of the wound and the huge jaws opened to hiss in agony, inadvertently freeing Harry. He wrapped his

hands around its neck, forcing the gaping maw away from him with all of his strength.

“Kill it!” Harry screamed at Hermione. “Quickly, while we have the chance.”

“I’m trying!” she shouted back, casting another spell that scored the snake’s back deeply, but missed severing its head due to the constant movement. “Hold still!”

“What? How the bloody hell do you think I can hold still?” yelled Harry, finally managing to get his legs under him as the snake wrapped its coils tighter.

With a mighty heave, he managed to lurch upwards, but overbalanced and crashed into Hermione.

“Get us out of here, now!” said Harry as the tangled trio staggered and started to fall. “Voldemort is coming.”

Hermione, arms wrapped around both Harry and the snake, twisted as they fell and Apparated them away just as the window and a large portion of the surrounding wall exploded inwards to allow the Dark Lord entry.

All Voldemort found in the wrecked room was a substantial length of his familiar’s splinched corpse and an odd, broken crossbow.

Miles away Harry felt his rage, and smiled.

Harry stood at the mouth of the tent gripping his spare crossbow and waited for the source of the white light to show itself. A silver-white doe, moon-bright and dazzling, picked her way over the ground, still silent, and leaving no hoofprints in the fine powdering of snow.

She stepped toward him, her beautiful head with its wide, long-lashed eyes held high. Harry stared at the creature, filled with wonder, not at her strangeness, but at her inexplicable familiarity. He felt that he had been waiting for her to come, but that he had forgotten, until that moment, that they had arranged to meet. She turned and loped off into the trees, almost beckoning him to follow.

“Pig’s foot,” said Harry, shaking off the strange feeling.

Nobody was so gullible that they would run off into the trees and away from the hidden camp because a glowing deer felt friendly, especially not Harry. The only thing stupider would be choosing to go for a solo dip in one of the ice-covered forest pools without even a warming charm.

Settling back down, Harry knew they would have to leave as soon as the others woke up. Somebody knew their general location, and that meant a change of tactics was again required.

Idly, Harry wondered if Hermione’s memory charms were up to the task of getting them into a nice Muggle hotel - one that served breakfast.

“We need to know what’s going on in the magical world,” said Ron. “I can’t stand not having any idea what’s happening out there. The last bit of real news we got was from The Toad.”

Hermione nodded reluctantly.

“All of my contacts are out,” said Harry. “Same with anybody we know, they’ll be watched for sure, and I wouldn’t trust Kreacher enough to call him too often, despite how he was acting before we left.”

“Maybe I can just duck into the Leaky for a while,” said Ron. “I can pick up a paper and a bit of gossip – you know how people talk when they are having a drink or two.

“No, the Leaky is too obvious, Ron,” said Hermione. “Any popular spot will definitely have people keeping an eye on them. Everybody who goes in is probably checked.”

“So let’s go to a less known place, somewhere a bit smaller, like Tinworth or, Upper Flagley. Bill’s got a place at Tinworth I think. Shell cottage or something he called it.”

“All right,” said Harry. “We need news, so let’s go get some papers and other stuff too, like maybe a wireless. You never know, they

might actually tell us something worthwhile. We'll need to use Polyjuice again, or maybe it'd be better to transfigure our hair and things, just to be sure, but I reckon only one of us needs to be under the cloak keeping a watch for the other two."

Both he and Ron turned to look expectedly at Hermione.

"You both just want to go for a pint, don't you?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at them.

Neither of them tried to deny it.

"So you-know-who's name is taboo, eh? Just saying it gets a bunch of snatchers on your case immediately. That's lucky," said Harry.

"I reckon," agreed Ron. "All this time I've been telling you not to say it, and I was right - You don't get much luckier than that!"

Hermione snorted in disgust.

"No," said Harry. "I meant it's lucky we have a sure-fire way to lure a bunch of snatchers into a trap."

Both of his friends looked at him as if he had spoken in Parsletongue.

"Well we do need some real information, and who else is going to know what's really going on if not some of the bad guys?" explained Harry.

They did not look reassured.

"Voldemort," said Harry, before running as fast as he could away from the rude hut they had constructed in the small clearing.

He was barely in his designated place when the loud crack of multiple apparition signalled the arrival of six wizards, and surprisingly, a couple of prisoners.

Immediately the snatchers spread out in a half circle around the hut, wands out and ready to use.

“Come out of there with your hands up!” called one. “We know you’re in there! You’ve got half a dozen wands pointing at you and we don’t care who we curse!”

Harry remained silent under his cloak, hoping they would take the bait and enter the building. His wish was granted a moment later when one of them suddenly strode forward and yanked the door open impatiently.

The second the door opened, it fired the modified trigger on the bottom of one of his fireworks. A dozen rockets exploded, obliterating the shack in a thunderclap of noise and a burning white light brighter than the sun.

Harry felt the heat of the light wash over him, and saw white spots even with his face buried in his hands and his eyes closed tightly. The shockwave passed less than a second later, almost knocking him over despite his cover.

He leapt to his feet, ready to fire sleep potion coated bolts as fast as his finger could pull the trigger, but it wasn’t needed. All of the attackers were down, either unconscious or thrashing on the ground clutching their faces.

To either side of the hut, red flashes of stunning spells shot out, putting the incapacitated wizards out of their misery and making sure the others would not wake up anytime soon.

“Way to go, Harry!” called Dean Thomas weakly from his position with the other prisoner. “I was hoping I’d catch up with you eventually.”

“Look, Harry,” said Ron. “I know you’ve got a saving people thing, but there is no way we can get into Malfoy Manor, let alone rescue the prisoners there.

“It’s bad enough we have Dean and Griphook to take care of now.”

Hermione was silent, torn between wanting to help save Luna, and the realities of the situation. It was the only intelligence of note gained from the captured snatchers, but it was woefully incomplete.

"They'll kill her, now that they've locked up her dad," said Harry. "And it's our fault. If we hadn't gone to his house-

"He brought it on himself by trying to hand you over!" yelled Ron, clearly getting frustrated. "I don't even know where the manor is, and I'll be bugged if I am going to try to grab some more snatchers hoping one of them knows."

"Dobby," said Harry suddenly. "Dobby knows where it is, and I bet he can get in and out too. He used to be their house elf!"

"How are you going to get in contact with Dobby?" said Hermione. "You can't just call him – he's not your elf."

"You can send a Patronus message to the Hogwarts kitchens," said Harry. "Even if he is not there, they'll get in contact with him for sure."

"Even if he dose get the message, I doubt very much if Dobby can carry a single person with him, let alone a few," added Ron. "There's bound to be more than one person there you know."

"We'll give Dobby some Portkeys," said Harry.

"The manor will be heavily warded against that sort of thing," said Hermione. "It will have protection spells and things on it."

"Have you forgotten? Anybody inside can take all of them down with a single word," said Harry smiling.

"The Taboo," said Hermione.

"The Taboo," Harry confirmed.

"Brilliant," said Ron.

Visions of Voldemort flying suddenly became clearer to Harry, as if the creature's mounting excitement made the connection stronger. Harry knew the destination, and the likely prize, but he could not go to Hogwarts himself and expect to survive.

"Mr. Ollivander, I'm sorry to disturb you," Harry said.

"My dear boy," Ollivander's voice was feeble. "You rescued us, I thought we would die in that place, I can never thank you enough."

Harry's scar throbbed constantly, and fleeting visions flickered in his vision. He knew, he was certain, that there was hardly any time left in which to beat Voldemort to his goal, or else to attempt to thwart him. He felt a flutter of panic, but stuck to his decision.

"Sir, I need some help, please."

"Anything," said the wandmaker weakly.

"Tell me exactly how the wand chooses the wizard, and tell me everything you know about the Elder Wand, and why you-know-who wants it."

Hermione had the nerve to look annoyed and embarrassed by Harry's question, until the old man started talking, that was.

"Dumbledore had the Elder Wand?" said Ron. "But then where is it now?"

"At Hogwarts," said Harry.

"But then, let's go!" said Ron urgently. "Harry, let's go and get it before he

does!"

"It's too late for that," said Harry. "He knows where it is. He's there now."

"Harry!" Ron said furiously. "How long have you known? Why have we been wasting time? Why did you talk to Ollivander first? We could have gone, we could still go."

"No," said Harry, and he sat down on the grass. "Hermione's right. Dumbledore didn't want me to have it. He didn't want me to take it. He wanted me to get the Horcruxes, probably because he didn't think the Elder Wand would accept me as its master."



“So you are just going to let you-know-who have it?” Ron screamed.  
“Are you insane?”

“No, Ron,” said Harry calmly. “I’m not.”

Suddenly there was a loud crack, and the slightly dishevelled form of Kreacher stood before Harry, a crooked stick clutched to his chest.

“He is what you be wanting, Master Harry,” Kreacher said shakily, holding the wand out reluctantly. “Kreacher is taking it from the grave, as you told him, and is leaving behind the stick you be giving him. Nobody be seeing Kreacher.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Harry said, smiling and took the wand from Kreacher’s hand. “You have done very well. Regulus would be proud.”

As his hand closed over it, a single, pure white spark, brighter than an evening star, fluttered from the end to waft away in the gentle breeze.

In the back of his head, he felt Voldemort’s uncontrolled rage as the wand he took from his defeated enemy’s tomb suddenly gave a squawk and turned into a rubber chicken.

Harry’s smile grew larger.

“Harry Potter,” said Griphook. “I have some information for you that may or may not be useful, but will go someway towards paying off the debt I owe to you for freeing me.

“Bellatrix LeStrange has a vault at Gringotts. There are special instructions and procedures to be followed should anybody wish to enter that vault, an unusual situation, I can assure you.”

“Didn’t she put the sword she thought was Gryffindor’s in there?” asked Harry.

“These instructions precede that incident, leading me to think she has much more than gold stored there,” answered Griphook. “It has been said that Gringotts is-”

"The safest place in the world for anything you want to hide," finished Harry. "I've heard. Thank you, Griphook."

"Nobody has ever robbed Gringotts before," said Ron. "It's impossible."

"That's not true," said Harry. "Quirrell got into the vault where the Philosopher's stone was being held."

"Yeah, but that was you-know-who," countered Ron. "And the vault was empty. If there really is a Horcrux in Bellatrix's vault, you can be sure it takes a bit more than just a key to get in."

"Even getting to her vault will be almost impossible," said Hermione. "We can't exactly Polyjuice ourselves and just ask to go in, can we?"

"True, but Griphook told me her vault number, so we don't have to go to her vault," said Harry. "We give them my key, but then use the Imperius curse to get a Goblin to take us to the vault above Bellatrix's instead. Griphook refused to confirm it, but he didn't deny that the Goblins had a way to get into most vaults, if they need to. That's how Quirrell probably got in."

"Hang on," said Ron. "The vault above to Bella's? What are we going to do there?"

Unlike Dudley, Vernon's favourite television shows were surprisingly intellectual. The morbidly obese man and his horse-faced wife shared a mutual interest in a specific type of show: Heist movies. In particular, ones involving bank robberies.

Perhaps it was just the thought of accessing all that wealth without earning it that interested the Dursleys, but Harry had overheard enough of them to know a few tricks.

"Dig," said Harry. "We dig."

Ron and Hermione slowly lowered Harry through hole, stopping when he called out to them. The Goblin who brought them down was keeping guard outside the vault from which they were working, ready to turn aside anybody coming to investigate the noise, should their

digging be heard. So far, everything was going to plan, thanks to Invisibility cloak covered Hermione's excellent Imperio and Confundus charms.

Suspended by a rope just below the ceiling of Bellatrix's vault, Harry shone a lamp around, and marvelled at the wealth beneath him.

Mountains of galleons, piles of armour, and treasures of every other description filled the enormous vault. There were even isles of shelves, filled with more priceless artefacts, stacked right up to where Harry hung.

And sitting on the top of one of the shelves, barely two feet away from Harry, was the small, golden cup of Helga Hufflepuff.

"Too easy," laughed Harry, stuffing the cup into a sack.  
"It's at Hogwarts," said Harry. "You-know-who is rightly pissed, and he is going to check on the Horcruxes. The last one is at Hogwarts."

The visions had never been as clear, much to Harry's terror.

"How can we get in?" asked Ron. "All the passages will be guarded, probably by Dementors, and we can't just walk in, can we?"

"Don't need to," said Harry. "Kreacher!"

With a muffled pop, the house-elf appeared.

"You mean, we could have been here, in Hogwarts all along, using the room of requirement as our base, and none of us thought of it?" asked Ron incredulously.

"Well it's not like I thought of it on my own," explained Neville. "Harry showed us how the room worked and all. I was just looking for a good place to hide!"

"Hide," said Hermione thoughtfully. "A good place to hide – something."

“That’s it!” yelled Harry excitedly. “He has hidden it in the Room of Requirement – that place where people have been hiding stuff for centuries!”

“Hidden what?” asked Neville.

“Good question,” said Harry, his enthusiasm dropping slightly.

“Why don’t we just torch the whole room,” asked Ron, looking at the city of junk laid out before him. “We know it’s here, so let’s just burn the lot with that fire spell Hermione said would destroy the Horcrux; Fiendfyre.”

“We really need to be sure,” said Harry. “We can’t risk being wrong.”

“Then we need some help,” said Ron. “We will never find it in here alone.”

“Everybody is needed outside to keep Voldemort out,” said Hermione. “A few people won’t make a difference, and more than a few will weaken the defences.”

“People?” asked Ron. “I was thinking of House-elves myself. They’ll get through this lot quick-smart, and it’ll keep the little fellows out of trouble outside.”

The look on Hermione’s face was priceless.

“What?” asked Ron. “It’s not like I haven’t had a good idea or two before you know!”

Harry took off the invisibility cloak and looked down upon the man he hated. Voldemort had struck Snape down, using the snake to murder the man he thought was the true master of the Elder wand.

A terrible rasping, gurgling noise issued from the dying man’s throat.

“Take. . . it. . . . Take. . . it. . . .”

Something more than blood was leaking from Snape. Silvery blue, neither gas nor liquid, gushed from his mouth and his ears and his eyes, and Harry knew what it was; it was memories.

“No,” said Harry.

Shock and then anger registered on Snape’s face.

“Take it!” he rasped again, more forcefully.

“Forget it, Snivellus,” said Harry coldly. “Whatever it is, I don’t care. You have nothing I want to see, except possibly your last breath. Goodbye.”

“No!” croaked Snape, but Harry had already stood up and stepped back a pace.

“Look at me,” Snape croaked, sounding desperate.

“You hate Muggles,” said Harry, “but let me share with you two pearls of wisdom they have: ‘Revenge is a dish best served cold’, and ‘You reap what you sow’.”

With that, Harry turned his back on the dying man and walked away.

Behind him, Hermione rushed forward to scoop up the memories with her wand before they disappeared, but Harry didn’t care – he just hoped the loathsome man couldn’t come back as a ghost. A swarm of Dementors glided through the trees of the forest, making it impossible for Harry to pass undetected. Snape’s memories and the knowledge of his own impending death did nothing to help Harry conjure even the faintest of Patronus mists.

Briefly he considered setting the forest on fire using some of the products still filling his well prepared pockets, but dismissed it when he realised it would only hasten Voldemort’s attack on the castle and do little to thin their ranks.

Reaching into the pouch still hanging around his neck he took out the cracked Resurrection stone, forcibly extracted from the snitch all those months before at the Burrow.

Placing it in his hand, he turned it three times.

As with the times before when he had tried it, there came a flittering feeling that people he had once known and loved were standing around him, comforting and reassuring him.

"This had better work," he mumbled to himself, then pulled the invisibility cloak on and headed into the forest to confront Voldemort.

Around him, the Dementors didn't appear to notice him, but glided away as if guided by Harry's invisible guardians.

He was walking into a place to be struck by a killing curse cast by the vilest wizard alive, so that the creature could eventually be killed, but now he finally knew his purpose in life. He didn't need extraordinary magical power and skill, or even moderate ones. All he needed was a willingness to do what was needed, no matter what the cost to himself.

Just like with Apparition, there was no short cut, no clever use of his limited magical prowess that would remove the piece of Voldemort's soul accidentally imbedded in him. He couldn't even have a friend strike him down, since the prophecy required his death by Voldemort's hand.

Harry was finally doing something the Dursleys' frequently wished for; He was going to get himself killed, but at least it was to save his world, and not so that his 'family' didn't have to put up with his presence anymore.

It annoyed Harry immensely to know Vernon would likely be very happy with this outcome, but it was still the right thing to do. Circling the camp of the Death Eaters took a lot longer than Harry had allowed for. Before he had made it all the way around, time was up.

"I thought he would come," said Voldemort in his high, clear voice, his eyes on the leaping flames. "I expected him to come."

Nobody spoke. They seemed as scared as Harry did. His hands were sweating as he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and stuffed it into a

hidden pocket with the Elder wand where they would both be safe from discovery.

"I'm here," said Harry, stepping out from the trees.

"Harry Potter," said Voldemort. "The Boy Who Lived."

None of the Death Eaters moved. They were waiting: Everything was waiting.

Voldemort raised his wand. There was a flash of green light, and everything went dark.

Harry accepted he had to die; it was the only way to destroy the final Horcrux inside of him. The prophecy made it clear that he had to be killed by Voldemort himself, but that didn't mean he was going to give up his life for only that one thing.

As his body fell to the ground, his hand opened, dropping a tightly held trigger.

All around the clearing, from a dozen head-height places where Harry carefully placed them, special packages ignited. Bombs, filled with the most potent blasting potions and bags of ball bearings, suddenly woke up the night, mowing down Voldemort's followers in a deadly hail of high velocity steel. The blasts were so powerful, many of the trees didn't survive, doubling the size of the clearing.

Harry knew Voldemort would still try to take Hogwarts; his ego and megalomania would allow no less, but at least now the defenders would have a much better chance.

While it was extremely unlikely, Harry hoped Voldemort himself might become a victim of this, his last trick.

The explosion shook the ground for miles and echoed all the way back to the castle, as did the screams of the Death Eaters and their allies caught up in the destruction.

Harry sat on the seat at a very ghostly platform nine and three quarters, swinging his legs happily, like a child waiting patiently for

the train. Dying was always a possibility he faced, and he had spent many hours alone in his cupboard thinking about it.

Overall, it was not something he ever really feared, not after the many times he had wished for the release from his horrible childhood it represented.

Nearby, a small thing, looking roughly like a naked child, lay curled on the ground. Its skin was raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath.

"Hello," Harry said cheerfully when Albus Dumbledore appeared in front of him.

"Hello, Harry," said the spectre of the dead headmaster, looking slightly surprised at Harry's happy demeanour.

"Is that meant to be Riddle?" Harry asked, nodding towards the wheezing abomination.

"In a manner of speaking," said Dumbledore.

Harry suddenly stood up and moved closer to it, bending over to scoop it up in his arms, despite his obvious distaste.

"You cannot help it," said Dumbledore sadly.

"Help it?" said Harry. "No, I'm putting it on the tracks.

"Any idea what time the next train arrives?"

Harry dropped his cloak, suddenly appearing in front of Voldemort, both surrounded by hundreds of people who came to fight the last battle inside of Hogwarts' great hall.

"You!" screamed Voldemort.

"Hello," called Harry cheerily, waving his hand like an excited child.



Cries of joy and surprise rose from the crowd. "He's alive! Harry's alive." Harry never took his eyes off Voldemort and the crowd suddenly went silent.

"Time to go, Tom," said Harry. "The gig's up."

Voldemort hissed like the snake he so represented.

"How will you slay me, Harry Potter? You are almost a Squib! Do you imagine Dumbledore's much vaulted 'Love' is somehow going to leap out of your hand and best me, the greatest wizard to have ever lived?"

"Look around you, Riddle," laughed Harry. "Every person is here because of love. None of them is forced to be here by fear or magic – they have all come because they love too much to let you win. Do you really think they are going to let you leave?"

"And the prophecy?" asked Voldemort sarcastically. "Am I not meant to die by your hand? How can you expect a pathetic wizard like you to overcome me?"

"Yeah, about that," said Harry. "I've just got three words to say.

"Ready!" called Harry loudly and raising his empty hand in the air, higher than his head.

"No," screamed Voldemort in rage, as a hundred wands appeared in the hands of the crowd. "I am Lord Voldemort! You do not dare attack me. I am immortal."

"Aim!" Harry said, pointing the Elder wand directly at Voldemort's heart.

Voldemort raised his own wand, his sneer dropping as he dedicated all of his concentration on Harry and the magical battle that was about to begin. His blood red eyes roamed uncontrollably and a foam of spittle formed in the corner of the madman's mouth.

"You will die first Potter. Then I will kill every one of your friends - One at a time," said the Dark Lord.

"Did I forget to mention we destroyed all your Horcruxes with a Basilisk fang, including Ravenclaw's diadem?" said Harry with fake contriteness. "Oops, sorry."

said Harry with fake contriteness. "Oops, sorry."

Voldemort's eyes widened in fear and surprise, but Harry didn't give him a chance to recover.

"Fire!" yelled Harry, dropping his raised hand to signal the others.

Voldemort managed to get the first syllable of the killing curse out before dozens of different spells slammed into him from the surrounding people. Lights of every colour, including many the sickly green of the killing curse, crashed into the Dark Lord from all sides, smashing and breaking him like a watermelon caught between immense hammers.

As the mutilated and unrecognisable remains of Tom Riddle hit the floor, and a huge cry leapt from the throats of the defenders, Harry looked at his empty hand, then back to Voldemort.

"Idiot," he mumbled disgustedly.

"What will you do with the Hallows?" asked the painting of Albus Dumbledore.

"I'm keeping the cloak," said Harry. "One day I'll pass it on to my son, like it has been for hundreds of years."

"Of course, my dear boy," said Dumbledore. "And the stone?"

"I reckon there are a few people downstairs that deserve a chance to say goodbye to their loved ones," said Harry. "I know not everybody is suited, and I'll have to be fairly discrete, but it will go a long way to helping people like the Weasleys get over their loss."

“And one day, Teddy Lupin is going to have the chance to meet his parents. That’s the least I can do for my godson.”

Behind him, Hermione tried to muffle a sob.

“A truly noble sentiment, but what of the Elder Wand?” asked Dumbledore.

“I reckon it’s just a dirty great trouble magnet,” said Harry. “So nobody is going to have to worry about it again.”

Ron and Hermione let out anguished cries as an audible snap echoed through the headmaster’s office. Some of the portraits cried out too.

“Harry, how could you do that?” yelled Hermione. “We could have learned so much from it.”

“You ruddy great idiot,” screamed Ron. “If you didn’t want it, you should have given it to somebody else!”

“Who, Ron? You maybe?” Harry shook his head, stuffing the broken pieces back in his pocket and picking up his repaired phoenix wand. “You want to spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder, waiting for the next person to sneak up and try to do you in so they can take it from you?”

“And you, Hermione. Don’t you think wizards are powerful enough without a new breed of ‘super-wands’? Barely anybody uses their power properly now, so why do they deserve more? No this is the best way – trust me.”

Both of his friends suddenly looked ashamed. They knew he was right, that he could, as usual, see more clearly than they could.

“Only joking,” laughed Harry, taking the real Elder wand from his pocket. “You don’t honestly believe I’d be stupid enough to get rid of the one thing that might make me as good as a normal wizard, do you?”

"But that's not what we are going to tell everybody outside," he added meaningfully.

Epilogue: Nineteen and a bit years later.

"What if I'm in Slytherin?"

Harry crouched down so that the boy's face was slightly above his own. Alone out of Harry's three children, only his youngest son inherited Lily's eyes.

"Frederick Remus Albus Stan Jack Potter," Harry said quietly, so that nobody else could hear, "you were named for two of the greatest pranksters to ever enter Hogwarts, a former headmaster, the conductor of the knight bus, and a bloke I met on the street whose name I liked. Most were in Gryffindor, but it doesn't make any difference.

"You have been given a gift; you can do magic," said Harry, his wand lighting up between them to emphasis his words. "It is your responsibility and your privilege to learn how to use it properly, to squeeze every last bit out of it, no matter what house that mangy old hat drops you in."

"But just say—"

"—then Slytherin will have gained an excellent student, and you will have a chance to teach your new friends how to play the best pranks ever, won't you?"

Fred's eyes lit up as he suddenly realised the possibilities of belonging to a house renowned for its ambition and cunning, and not for its mischief making.

"But, if it really bothers you, tell Floppsy that you'll give him a bottle of leather cleaner for Christmas if he puts you in the house you want. I hear he's rather partial to the fumes.

"It's what I would have done, if I had known then what I know now."

As the train pulled away, an unexpected feeling of utter contentment flooded Harry. For nineteen years, he had lived a better life than he

had ever dreamed of before discovering the magical world. He was wealthy and respected, had a loving family, good friends, and a great job working for Kwikspell helping others get by with less than stellar magical prowess.

He even had a fun hobby as a Muggle stage magician, using sleight-of-hand to entertain children of all ages (although Ministry bureaucrats investigating him for possible secrecy violations every six months was becoming rather annoying).

Overall, not bad, for somebody who was almost a Squib.

Finite Incantatem.

Final Author's Note (sort of an omake):

I was really tempted to add the final line:

- Except for an occasional twinge in his scar...

Just to mess with you, and to keep JKR's promise of ending with the word scar... :)

Thanks to Nimbus 1944 for the tonic to the sorting hat idea.

Thanks again for taking the time to read my story.